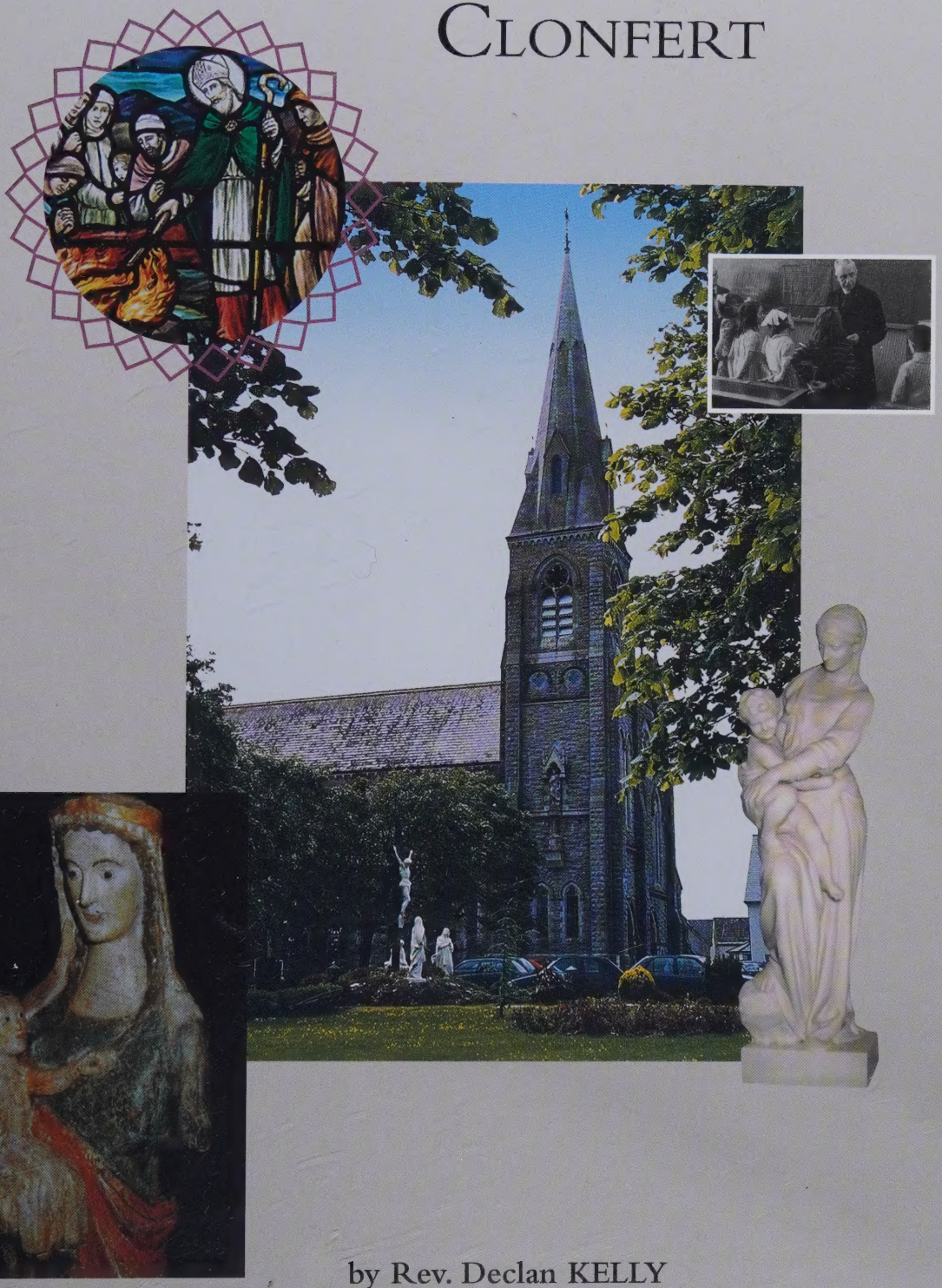
Meadow of the Miracles

A History of the Diocese of Clonfert



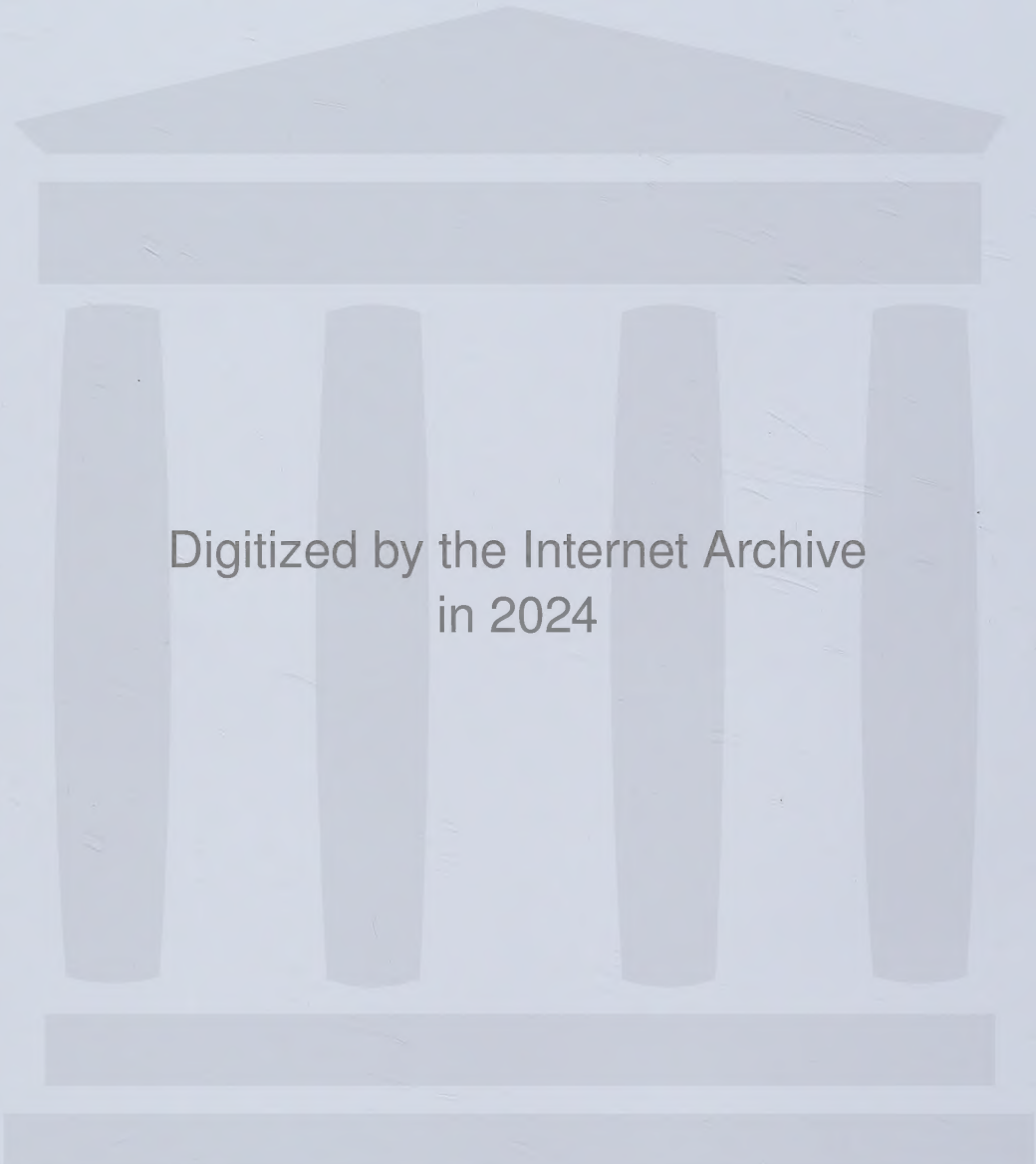
by Rev. Declan KELLY

Meadow of the Miracles

A history of the Diocese of Clonfert

by Rev. Declan Kelly

Éditions du Signe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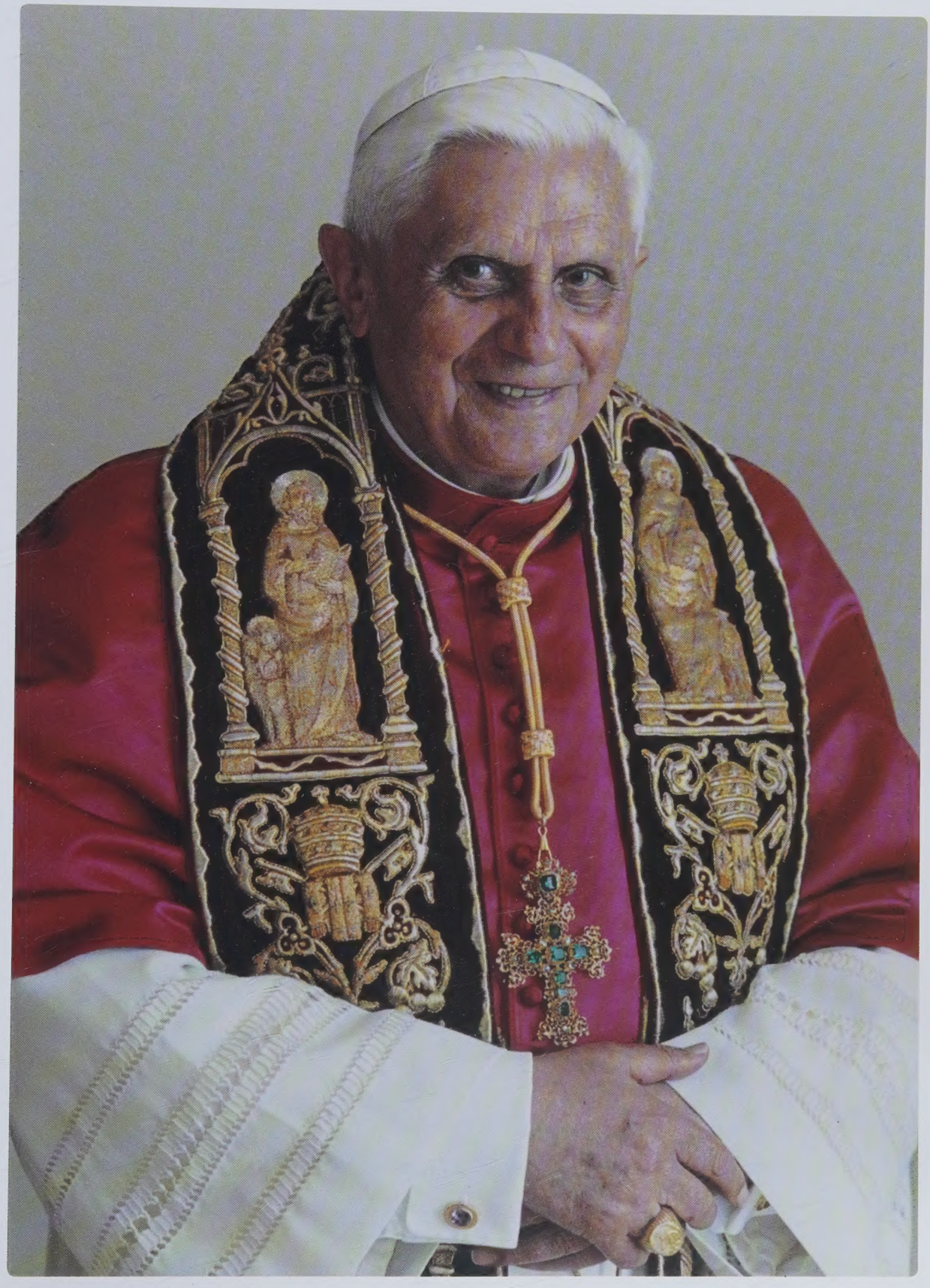

Clonfert's priests and religious

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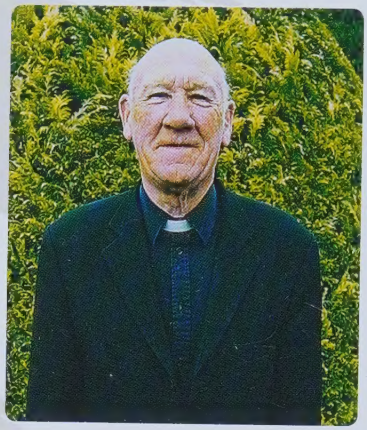

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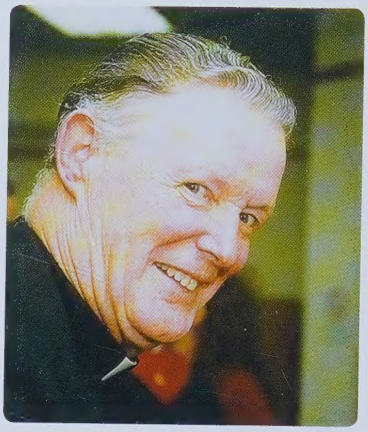

Rt Rev. Mgr Declan Gordon

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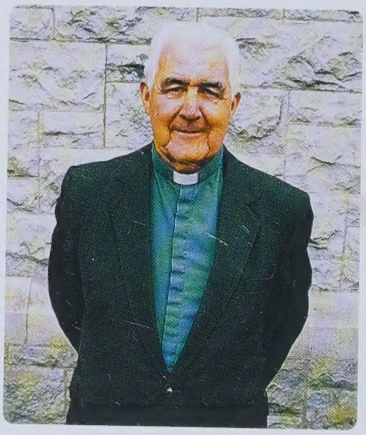
Very Rev. Ciaran Kitching, PP, VF

Very Rev. Cathal Geraghty, Adm

Rev. Sean Egan, CC



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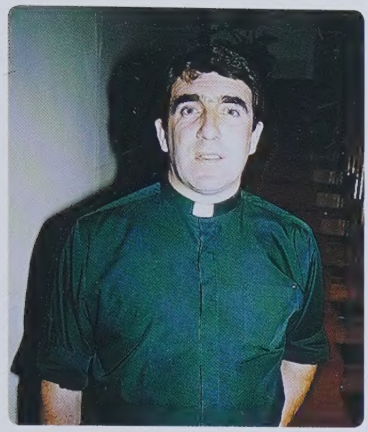

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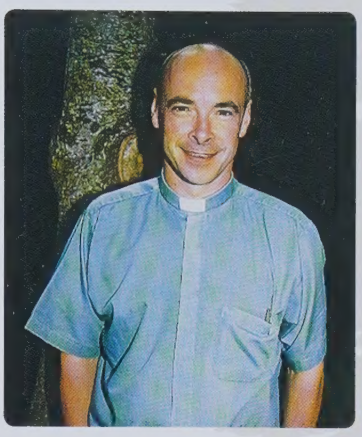

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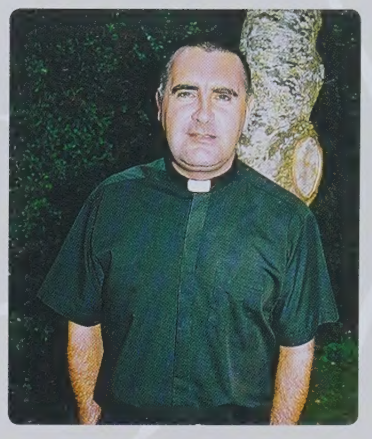

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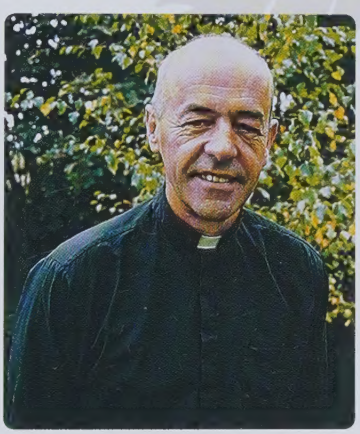
Rev. Bernard Costello, Chaplain
Portiuncula Hospital



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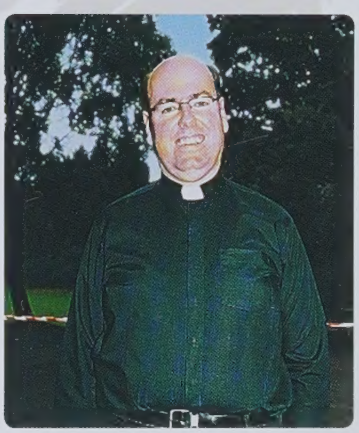

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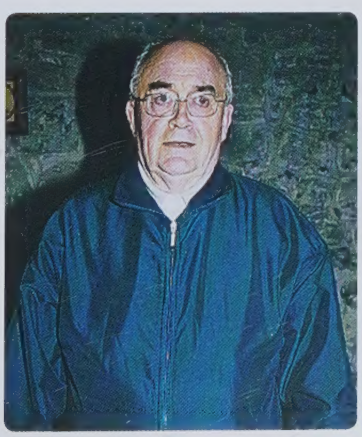

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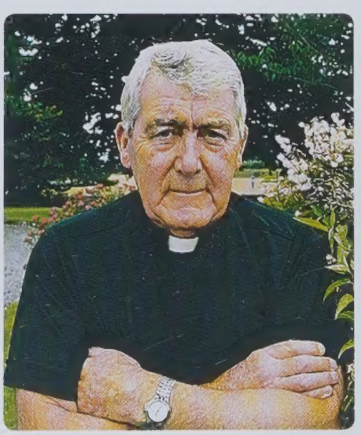
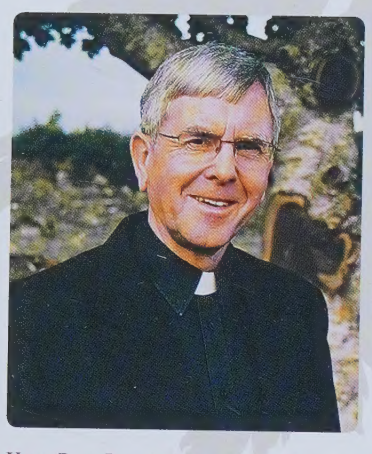


Rev. Aidan Murray, (SSC) CC

Clonfert's priests and religious



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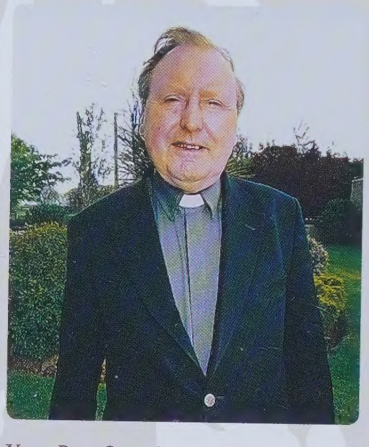

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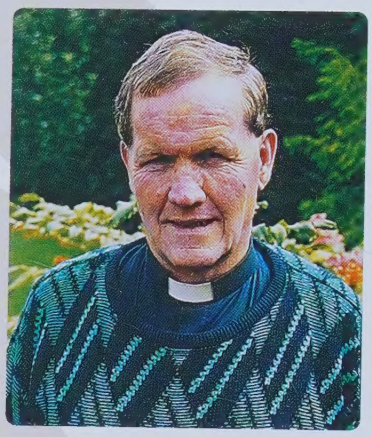

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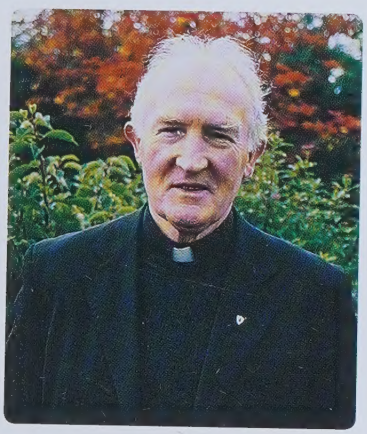

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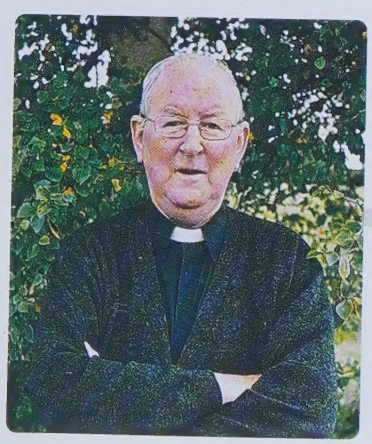
Very Rev. PJ Bracken, PP

Rev. Christy McCormack, Adm



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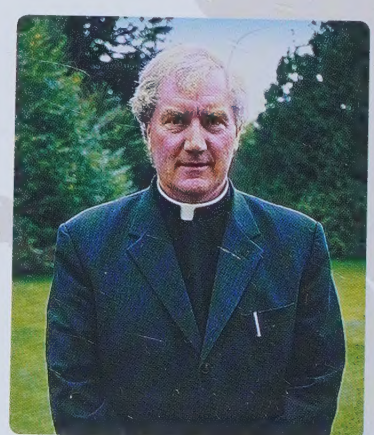

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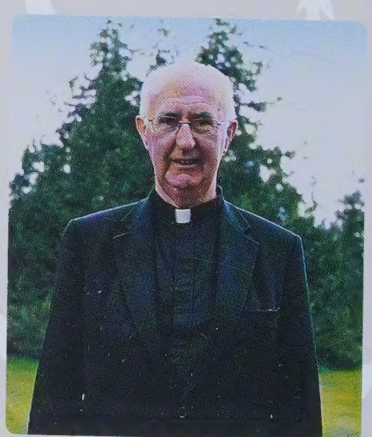

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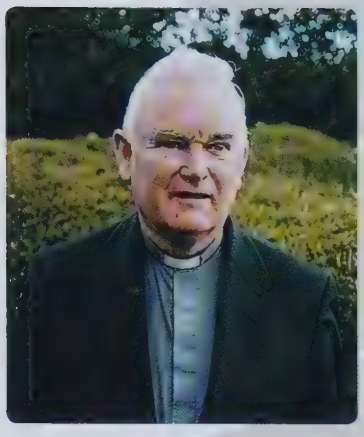
Rev. Richard McMahon (CSSR) CC



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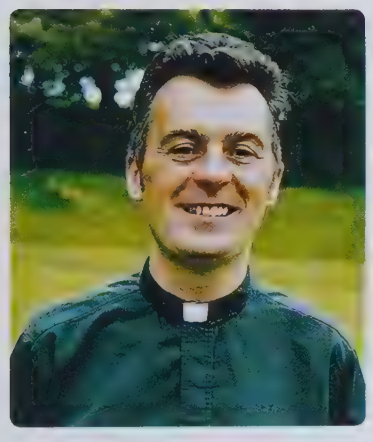
Rev. Hugh Briody, CC



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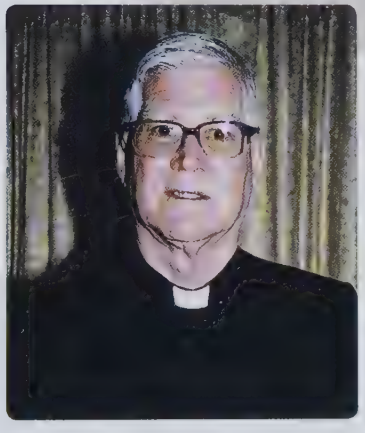

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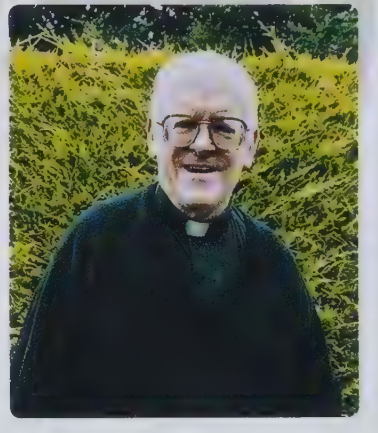

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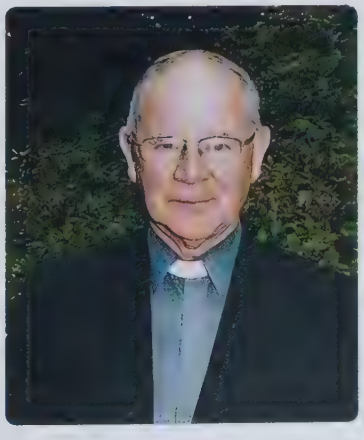

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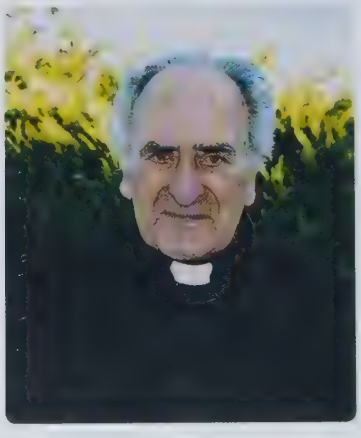

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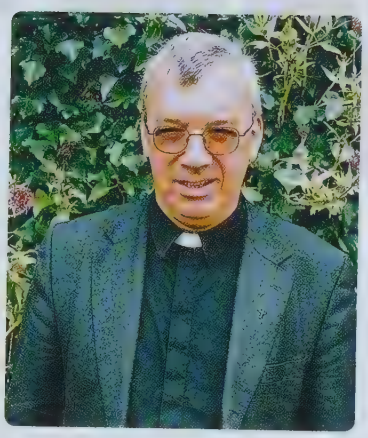
Clonfert's priests and religious



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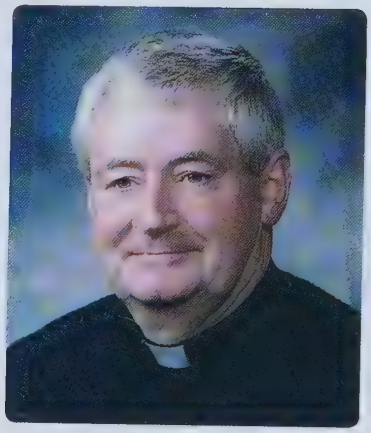
Rev. Kieran O'Rourke, CC



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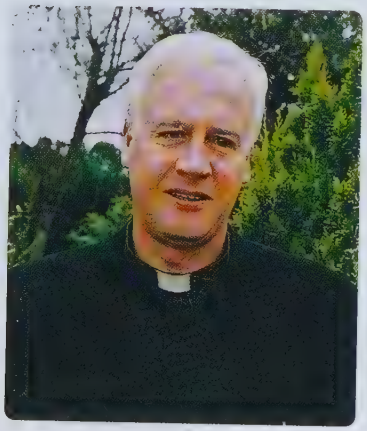

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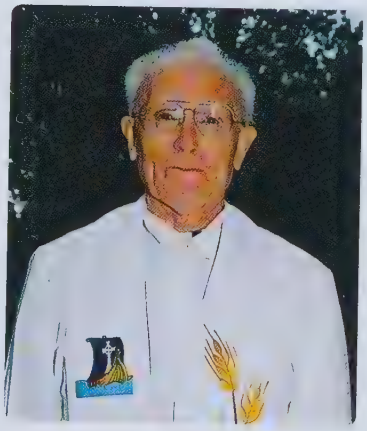
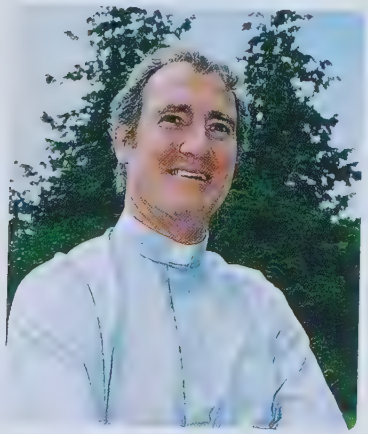


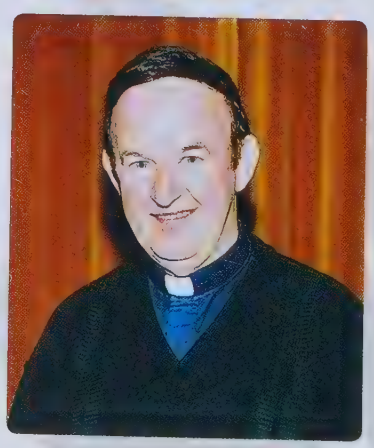
Very Rev. Patrick Naughten, PP

Rev. Noel Burke (SDB), Chaplain



Very Rev. Colm Allman, President
Diocesan College

Rev. Niall Foley, Vice Principal
Diocesan College



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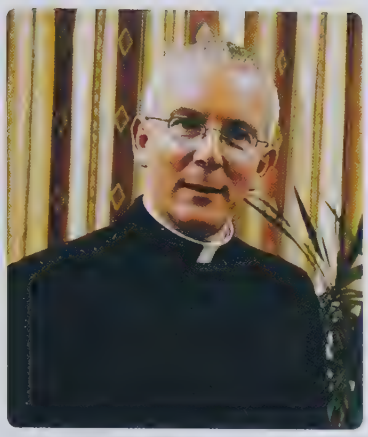
Diocesan College



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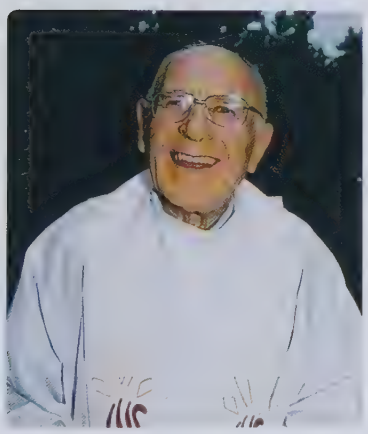
Very Rev. John Higgins, Retired

Very Rev. Anthony Cummins, Retired



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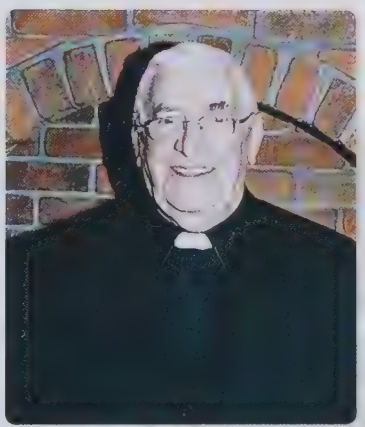

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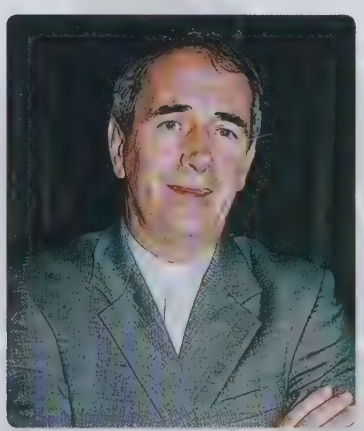

Rev. Abe Kennedy, Chaplain Portumna Community School

Rev. Nicholas Murray, CC

Appointments as of May, 2006

Clonfert's priest and religious

Diocesan Pastoral Concil

Geraldine Dowling

Bishop's Secretary

Carmelite Sisters, Loughrea, Venerate St Therese

Eddie and Lucy Stones

Emmanuel House of providence

Sr. Ita O'Flaherty (matron)

Diocesan College

Portiuncula Sisters

Mercy Sisters, Loughrea

Fr Finian Monaghan

Carmelite Fathers, Loughrea

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Author's Preface

While I was a seminarian in Maynooth, I regularly visited the community cemetery there to pray. It is a place of the most exceptionally beautiful peace and it was probably this same stillness that prompted Fr. Neil Kevin to write in his memoir *I remember Maynooth*, of attending the graveside prayers of fellow students: *you hear the wind making disturbances in the hills, you feel it blowing hard upon your face and sweeping through your hair, or on a sunny day you feel vividly the pleasant heat warming your body and sinking into the earth all around you.*

What most marked out this place, however, for my occasional pilgrimage was the knowledge that inside its walls were buried five students of my own diocese. Lest their names be completely forgotten, I record them here...Patrick Kelly. Andrew Griffin, Patrick Glynn. Thomas Hardiman, and John Lyons. Their names are recorded nowhere in the diocesan archives, but the evidence for their lives is provided on a wall plaque adjoining the cemetery. And they are all marked out by the one word...

Clonfertensis. The grief occasioned by their deaths, how often their parents' got to visit their graves, or even if they attended the funerals in times of much slower transport than our own, is known to posterity alone. As I thumbed the rosary beads my own mother had given me when I entered the seminary, I often thought of the numerous times these young men thumbed similar beads, and each time I felt a strong bond between myself and them, because we shared the same diocese, but above all, the same faith, and so all that seemed to separate us was death and time.

During the course of this book the reader will learn of many events which of their own time had a momentous impact on the lives of those concerned. Throughout, however, many of these people were united by two common bonds, the bonds of faith and place, marked out by their shared baptism in Jesus Christ.

This book took many forms in my own head before it found its way on to the printed page. I had initially hoped to treat of each parish as a historical unit within its own right, but finally, feeling that the whole was greater than the part, I opted for a chronological approach. In any event many parish histories have already been published and at the time of writing, the respective parishes of Clontuskert and Killimor are working on their own books.

I am most grateful to many people for their co-operation while this book was being written, particularly my colleagues in the diocese for allowing me such free access to their church grounds and parochial records. I wish to record special gratitude to Theo Hanley for his great professionalism and friendship and to Pauline McKeon for her time and patience in typing up this book. Thanks also to Bishop John for trusting me to carry through this project. If I have one regret, it is that I could not submit a draft for proofing to Rev. Dr. Kevin Egan, R.I.P. Admittedly, I would do so with great trepidation, as both he and the late an tAthair Eric Mac Fhinn were great scholars of church history. Both spent the larger part of their lives studying the history of Clonfert. Thankfully, they left many jottings and notes for me to draw upon as sources. I have, I confess, a mental image of Kevin's somewhat owlish features puckering up into an irrepressible chuckle at the work in hand.

Since research on this book began in earnest in April 2005, three more priests of the diocese have gone home to the Lord. Fr. Kevin Ryle, Fr. Pascal Donohoe, and as I pen these words, sad to note, we get ready to bury Fr. Tom Kennedy, the recently retired P.P. of Leitrim. When I first met Tom, I was still a deacon, and he vigorously quizzed me on how I filled my day as such. I replied in his own tongue-in-cheek manner that I had many different jobs. *So* he darted back *you're a bit of an all rounder!* That is what I hope this book will be, as all rounded a history of this diocese as I can offer. It is to the people of the diocese, therefore, and to the priests and religious that have served them that this book is dedicated. Any flaws in its writing are my own.

foreword

I am delighted to welcome the publication of the History of Clonfert. As a diocese, our roots go back to the monastic settlement of St. Brendan at Clonfert on the river Shannon in the mid sixth century. With twenty-four parishes, we are small in size, but we have a history of more than 1400 years. Our founder was one of the better-known saints of antiquity because of his reputed voyage of discovery. Whatever about the truth of the legend, Brendan was a major figure in his own right and had links with many of the monastic leaders of the period. The monastery he established at Clonfert continued to thrive for hundreds of years, and indeed a gathering of Irish leaders took place there in 999 to form a united front against the Viking invaders. A hundred and seventy years later, St Laurence O'Toole presided over a synod at Clonfert. Thus, for many centuries the Clonfert monastery had a strong and vibrant presence.

In the middle ages, the monastic system of administration gave way to a diocesan structure. The boundaries of the various dioceses were laid down at synods in 1111 and in 1152. Fr. Kevin Egan in his landmark publication *"The Parish of Ballinasloe"(Clonmore & Reynolds, 1960)* identifies some of the steps in the transition from monastic to diocesan systems. This book on Ballinasloe parish has a wealth of diocesan history as well.

The major event of the diocesan history of recent times was the building of St. Brendan's Cathedral. The cathedral was designed at a time of great national renewal and revival in Ireland. Bishop John Healy, Fr. Jeremiah O'Donovan and Mr. Edward Martyn planned to have the best of Irish design, and John Hughes, Michael Shortall, Michael Healy, Sarah Purser and others showed how Irish artists and craftspeople could reach the highest standards. We are happy that the Cathedral is now recognised as one of the great treasure houses of Irish ecclesiastical art.

The twentieth century was a period of growth and consolidation. Young men and young women joined the missionary orders in great numbers and the influence they exerted in the developing world was striking. This is a story that has yet to be fully told. Clonfert has links with the church on every continent.

I congratulate Fr. Declan Kelly on undertaking the onerous task of writing, editing and compiling this history. Despite being the youngest priest of Clonfert, he has a great feel for the history of the diocese and brings a wealth of skill and interest to the task. I thank the many priests, religious and laity who have helped him in the work of assembling and ordering the information. Clonfert has a rich heritage. I hope this volume will make it better known and appreciated.

John Kirby
Bishop of Clonfert
April 2006.

Introduction

The diocese of Clonfert derives its name from an almost secluded spot near the banks of the river Shannon, between the present towns of Banagher and Shannonbridge. Today there is no evidence there to show why, in the far distant past it was called *Cluain Fearta - The Meadow of the Burial Mound,* or if a Christian derivation is preferred - *The Meadow of the Miracles.*

The visitor of today will find only a peaceful locale, the central feature of which is a beautiful old church, whose exquisite architecture, from the stately Romanesque doorway and East window of early medieval times, to the nave and belfry of the Gothic period, reflects the faith of different ages.

But over the church, graveyard and the surrounding woods there still lingers a unique feeling of silence and solitude, which in the sixth century must have appealed so strongly to St. Brendan that he chose this place for his retreat. Here too he established a school and a monastery, which were destined to bear the torch of scholarship at a time when Ireland was the cultural beacon of Western Europe.

The territory of the diocese is entirely contained in the South East corner of the present County of Galway, with the exception of the parishes of Taughmaconnell and the half parish of Creagh in County Roscommon, and also Lusmagh in County Offaly.

The diocese covers the baronies of Loughrea, Leitrim, Longford, Clonmacnowen, Dunkellin and Athenry, to about the present county border of Galway and Clare; east and west from Lusmagh across the river Shannon to a point some few miles west of the town of Loughrea, the total length and breath being thirty-seven and thirty two miles respectively. There is within the diocese an *"island"* half parish named Kilmeen, which is in the Diocese of Tuam, but administered by the P.P of Leitrim. A possible explanation for this will emerge later in our story.

Geographically, the territory lies in the vast central plane of carboniferous limestone extending from Dublin Bay to the shores of Lough Mask. On this once depended the fame of the Ballinasloe quarries where the strata of limestone were of a quality and regularity permitting of the finest monumental work, which can still be seen in some ecclesiastical structures within the diocese.

The diocese is also riven through its greatest breath by the great bar-eskers known as *Esker Riada* which extend from Dublin to Galway, entering the Clonfert area at Ballinasloe, while other eskers divide the countryside in various places, notably in the parishes of Portumna, Tynagh and Killimor. These are all relics of a far-off age and speak to the modern geography student of a time when the land freed itself from the ice, which gradually receded leaving huge straggling piles of inter-glacial gravels in its wake.

There is no great expanse of water within Clonfert. If we disregard Lough Derg, which forms the boundary of the diocese for a considerable distance, the only other lake worthy of mention is Lough Rea, hard by the town of that same name, now a prosperous satellite of the city of Galway. The lake receives its main supply of water from springs beneath it and under it lie the remains of *Crannóg's* - artificial islands which protected early medieval man from uninvited guests.

The greatest scenic beauty is to be found in the west in the rugged ranges and valleys of Slieve Aughty. Once these were covered with vast forests of oak, as is shown by many place-names still surviving, names like Derrybrien, Derruber and Derrygoolin.

Bishop's vestments (detail), St Brendan encounters Jasconius the Whale

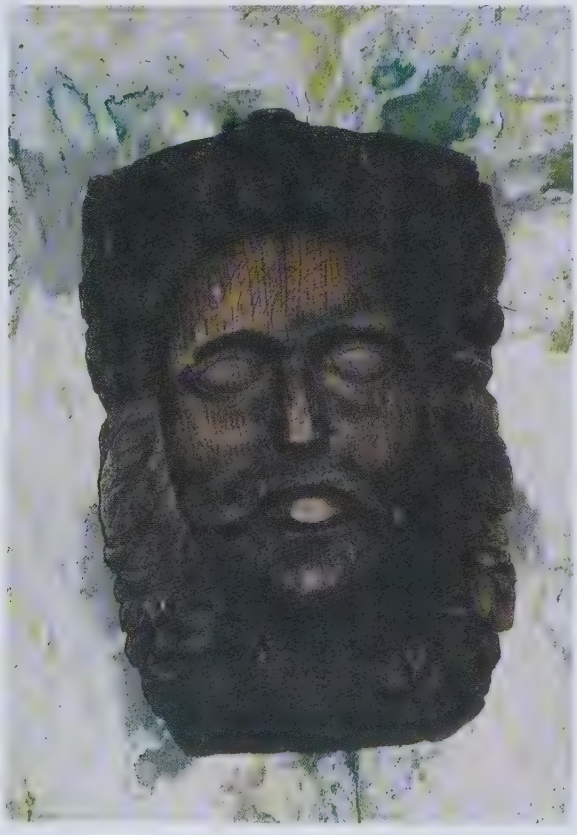
Pre Christian Clonfert

There is evidence of human occupation of the area in prehistoric times.

A number of polished stone axe-heads found many years ago were associated with the Neolithic period (4,000 BCE-2,200 BCE).

A relic of a later time is the *Turoe Stone* which originally stood upon the rath of Feerwore, but is now to be found on Turoe Pet Farm. Its carving is recognised as one of the finest examples of La Téne decorative art executed perhaps three hundred or so years before the Christian era.

In the dim past there dwelt on the Shannon-side a pre-Celtic fisher-folk, the Fir Iboth, who were perhaps akin to the early inhabitants of the Hebrides. In the northeast corner, on either side of the river Suck were settled another pre Celtic people called the Sogain, supposed to be of Pictish origin. An old life of St. Grellan identifies the early inhabitants of Hymany as of the Firbolgic race, but this term may in this instance have been used to designate the whole pre-Celtic population of the territory. A branch of the Fir Bolg proper dwelt in Sliabh Eachtgha or Aughty at the south western end of the diocese.



St Grellan, from Finnure Chapel, Mullagh

In or around the year 100, the Gaelic prince Tuathal established the united kingdom of Connaught and Meath. A hundred years afterwards his descendant, Connced Cathach divided Ireland with Eoghan Mór of Munster, making the boundary the Escer Riada, which runs through the diocese of Clonfert and from Ballinasloe to Athenry. He established a dynasty, which was to retain the High Kingship until 1022. Descended from him was Niall of the Nine Hostages who ruled at Tara from c.380 to 405. To the latter's son Laoghaire fell the lot of receiving St. Patrick when he came to Ireland. Three other princes of the race of Conn, known as the three Collas marched against Ulster in the year 33 and established a new kingdom there called Airgialla, corresponding to the present counties of Louth, Monaghan and Armagh

In every region under the rule of Dál Cuinn, during the centuries of its domination, Dál Cuinn septs were being constantly superimposed on the tributory peoples. And so we find in the fifth century or earlier, Máine Mór, a descendant of the Collas, coming southward from the district of Clogher to establish himself in the plain of the river Suck and to give his name to a territory, which in the beginning may have coincided roughly with the present diocese of Clonfert, but which by the ninth century included the whole eastern portion of the present Co. Galway as well as the southern half of the County Roscommon, He imposed his domination on the Sogain, known as the Senchenóil - *the ancient kin*- the Pictish tribe which inhabited the plain of the river Suck.

A detailed account of this annexation is given in the *Life of St. Grellan*. Grellan flourished in the time of St. Patrick and was given by Duach Gallach, King of Connacht, a place called Achadh Fionnabhrach, where he built a church before Máine came to Connacht. On a tour of the province Grellan had reached Kilclooney, which lay in or near Magh Sencheneóil over which Cian, chief of the Sogain ruled. At the same time the hosts

The Turoe Stone, Bullaun

of Maine had reached Druim Clasach in Tir-Many and plundered the country, sending messengers to Cian demanding territory and tribute. St Grellan prevented a clash of arms and arranged a peace between Cian and Maine, ordering that hostages be given into the hands of Cian as pledges for its observance. The noblest of these Amhlaigh, son of Máine was given in charge to Cian's lawgiver. The wife of the lawgiver fell in love with him, whereupon the lawgiver went to Cian and induced him to murder all the hostages. A feast was arranged for Máine and his chiefs at which it was intended to destroy them also. However, St. Grellan was made aware of this treachery and at his prayer the earth softened and the hosts of Cian were swallowed up. In gratitude Máine and his people bowed down their heads to Grellan and thus he became patron of the Uí Máine.

Such indeed is the story, but it savours of a concoction by the historians of the Uí Máine, calculated to cover a treachery not on the part of the Senchenóil but of their conquerors. Nevertheless, by the fifth century the Uí Máine, had taken over the territory of the Delbhna. The Delbhna peoples were of Munster origin and Delbhna Nuadat occupied the southern part of county Roscommon until their final subjugation by the Uí Máine in 756. They became a dearthuath or tributory people of Uí Máine. The limits of the boundary of Hy Many at this period, which is that of its greatest expansion, are given in certain vellum mss in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin.

The river Graney flows from Lough Graney through Lough O'Grady to the Shannon near Scariff. It formed the boundary in the Southwest as far as Lough Graney. Thence the boundary ran northwards by Slieve Eachtgha or Aughty as far as Seefin, then still northwards, probably by the present western boundaries of Kilconieran and Kiltulla parishes to Athenry, i.e. to the east of it, for Athenry was never included in Hy Many, or in Clonfert. From Athenry the boundary extended still northwards and to the west of Abbeyknockmoy, through Union in the parish of Killererin, as far east as Eiscir Aluing in the parish of Tuam. Thence it swept in a broad curve northwards to the village of Ballymoe, on the borders of the present counties of Roscommon and Galway. From there it ran almost due east in a straight line to the Shannon at Cluain Tuaiscirt, which was north of Ath Liag, the present town of Lanesboro. The Shannon was the boundary to a point south of Banagher. From there it veered south-eastwards into Leinster to include the wedge-shaped strip of territory along the northern bank of the little Brosna river, co-terminus with the present parish of Lusmagh. From the mouth of the Brosna it again followed the Shannon to link up with the southwestern boundary at Scariff.

Hy Many was probably the largest petty kingdom in the country, and besides the Delbhna there were several other subject peoples in the territory. These were the Cathraigh on both sides of the Suck, the Corco Moncho, who perhaps gave their name to Corca-Mogha, now the parish of Kilkerrin in the north-east of Co. Galway, the Cadanachs of the Feadha, now the parish of Drum, as well as Muintir Milcon, the men of Magh Senchencóil, the family of the Ó'Mailfinnains and the remnants of the Fir Bolgs, the extent of whose occupation is unknown.

The Coming of Christianity

Tabernacle door, St Michael's, Ballinasloe, executed by Mia Cranwell in gold, silver and champleve enamels depicting the Emmaus Scene

Christianity came to Hy Many in the time of St. Patrick. He himself is said to have baptised some of the Uí Máine at his church in Fuerty and is stated to have set foot in Magh Finn which was co-extensive with the present parish of Taughmaconnell. It is probably to his contemporary St. Grellan, that the evangelisation of this people is to be attributed. The great veneration in which this saint was held during later centuries can scarcely have arisen from what may have been a fictitious link with the Hy Manian Conquest. It is stated in the *Book of Lecan* that the race of Máine, both men and women, pay a *screaball Ceathrach*, ovine or tribute in sheep, to St. Grellan. He presides over their battles, in as much as his crozier is borne in the standard of the King of Hy Many. In the ancient life of St. Grellan he is stated to be entitled to every firstling pig and lamb and every firstling foal from the race of Maine. The crozier of St. Grellan was preserved with care for centuries in the family of Cronelly, who were the coarbs of the saint and was in existence in 1836, but has since disappeared. It is also stated in his life that he was established in his foundation of Achaidh Fionnabhrach by St. Patrick who guaranteed that seven garments should be given from every chieftain's wife as a tribute to the young cleric. The existence of ecclesiastical authority in Hy Many before the advent of St. Brendan cannot be overlooked. The *Leabhar Breac* preserves the tradition of a tribal episcopate. There it is stated that according to St. Patrick's testament, there should be a bishop for every chief tribe, *cecha Primtuathi*, of Ireland. It is probable that St. Grellan was the first bishop to be appointed to Hy Many. If he had immediate successors, all reference to them is lost, as the surviving episcopal lists do not record a bishop before St. Brendan's time.

St Michael's, Ballinasloe

St. Brendan of the Sea

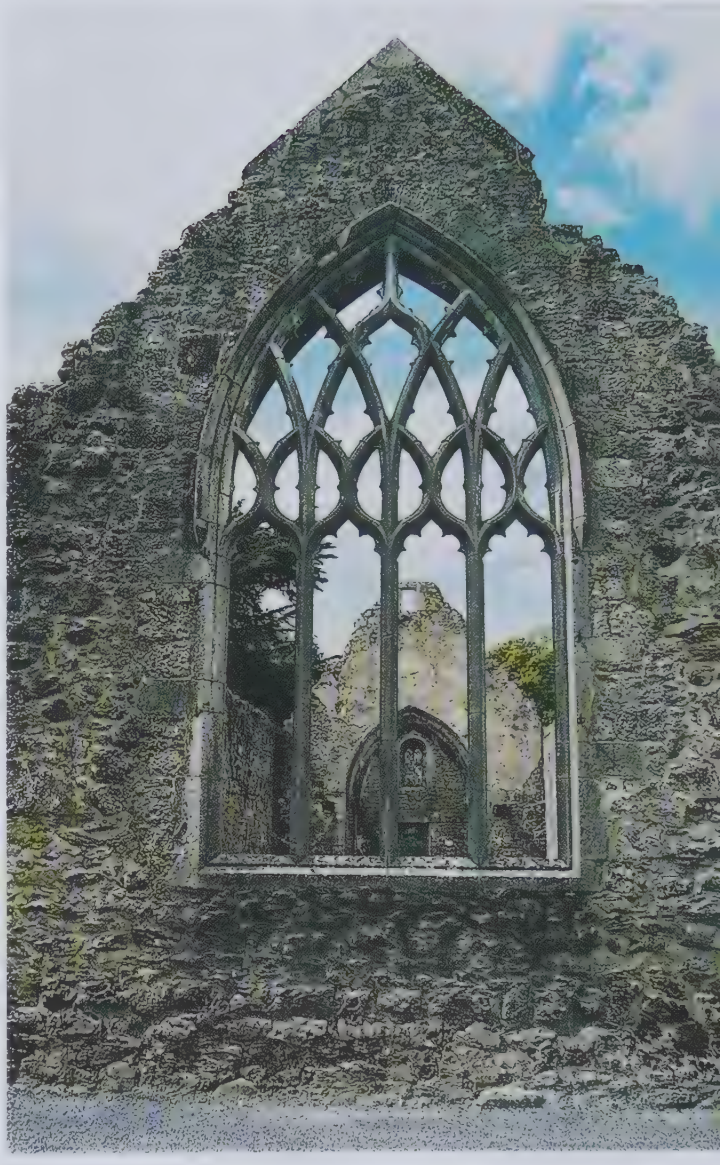
To Brendan, son of Fionnlogha is due the foundation of the school and monastery of Clonfert. Already, before he came to the Shannon, he had won fame for his sanctity and learning. He was born during the reign of Aonghus Mac Natfraoich, King of Munster, about the year 484. His father Fionnlogha came of the noble family of the Ciarraidhe Luachra, who gave their name to that territory which now forms the northern portion of the present County Kerry. His birthplace, it is said, was on the Kerry coast somewhere west of the town of Tralee.

He was reared in the paternal home, but while still young, was taken by Bishop Earc and placed under the care of St. Ita, a noblewoman of the Déisí race, whose convent was at a place now known as Killeedy in County Limerick. Five years he remained in her care with other children, many of whose names were destined to appear in the Calendar of Irish Saints.

After five years Bishop Earc undertook Brendan's future training, which included writing, the study of the Latin language and Sacred Scripture. He then wished to travel, in order to learn and record *"The Rules of the Irish Saints"*. To this end he was encouraged by Earc, who promised that when he had his work accomplished he would ordain him priest. Brendan headed northwards, bidding goodbye to St. Ita on the way. Soon, as she told him would happen, he met a young man named Colman Mac Lenin, who on Brendan's advice was to devote the rest of his life to prayer and penance, and after his death to become Patron Saint of the Diocese of Cloyne.

Brendan's first stop was at the school of St. Jarlath at Cluain Fois in the vicinity of Tuam, where he spent some years of study. Thence he went to Maigh Ai in central Roscommon, where an old biographer relates that he received dictation from the mouth of an angel, and committed himself to writing the *Rules of the Holy Church*. Armed with these he returned to St. Earc, who ordained him priest.

It was after that, says the scribe, *great love of the Lord grew within him and he longed to leave home, parents, possessions and fatherland.* He besought the Lord to give him some remote land far away from his people. At this time too he had cells constructed near his dwelling place in Kerry for the disciples who had begun to gather round him. Perhaps it was for some of these very disciples that the beehive huts were made, which are still to be seen at Kilmalcedar, Gallarus, and in the Blaskets. There are similar cells also on the Island of Kilshannig and in the vicinity of Mount Brandon. After a visit to St. Ita, Brendan made another foundation this time on Inis-dádruim, an



Window, Old Dominican Friary, Portumna

island on the Shannon. Ardfert, later to become the cathedral of a diocese of the same name, was another foundation.

About this time, too, we are told, St. Brendan began his voyages into the Atlantic. He was shown an island from the summit of Slieve Aughty, far out in the ocean and for seven years he sailed in search of it. On the outward journey he visited Aran. He sailed past the Paradise of the Birds and saw Judas Iscariot, who was exiled there for eternity. Once he and his monks landed on a whale, Jasconius, which was as big as an island! At last he sighted land far to the west. It was the *Promised Land of the Saints,* which he had been seeking. Whether or not there is any historical foundation for these tales, it cannot be denied that it was through them that the name and fame of Brendan spread. Doubtless, he did get around as the number of ancient foundations, which bear his name in Scotland, the Hebrides, the Orkneys, the Shetlands, and even in the distant Faeroes, bear witness. The story of his voyage made its way into many languages, and many countries in Western Europe and held an extreme fascination for medieval peoples, leaving its mark on European literature up to the present day.

St Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea

No doubt too it provided information for later voyages by the Spaniards and Portuguese in the time of Columbus. It is also recorded that in 1721 a Spanish ship left Tenerife in the Canaries to find St. Brendan's island. In more recent times his voyages were recreated - by Bill Verity in 1968 by Tim Severin in 1976 –1977.

His final and greatest foundation, however, was made at Clonfert in either 558 or 564. By now at least in his late seventies, he had a bishop Moenu to assist him. Moenu was to predecease him in 571. While St. Brendan did not have episcopal orders, he still exercised ecclesiastical jurisdiction over a wide area.

To understand this, one must take into account the organisation of the Irish church of the period. St. Patrick, when he came to Ireland could not but have intended to establish the government of the church on the only system known to him, the system followed by the rest of Christendom.

This involved the appointment of bishops with episcopal orders and jurisdiction to definite sees, the foundation of a parish clergy and the establishment of monasteries of regulars.

Instead a monastic church with a strong national spirit developed and this remained the case until the twelfth century. In other words, jurisdiction gradually passed into the hands of the greater abbots who were rarely bishops. Of the latter, there were many, but in the course of time their function came to be regarded as spiritual only, and they were chosen for their piety. How the monasteries succeeded in acquiring that ruling prerogative is not quite clear.

The large number of bishops ruling tiny sees may have initially weakened the power of the episcopate. This arose from the great number of petty kingdoms and Tuatha in Ireland, each of which demanded its own separate spiritual head. The country was devoid of towns, which did not develop until the 10th century, and the monasteries supplied the deficiency. Being centres of piety, learning and the arts, they gradually assumed such a position of importance that the abbot became more powerful than the bishop, until the stage was

Clonfert Cathedral
West Doorway

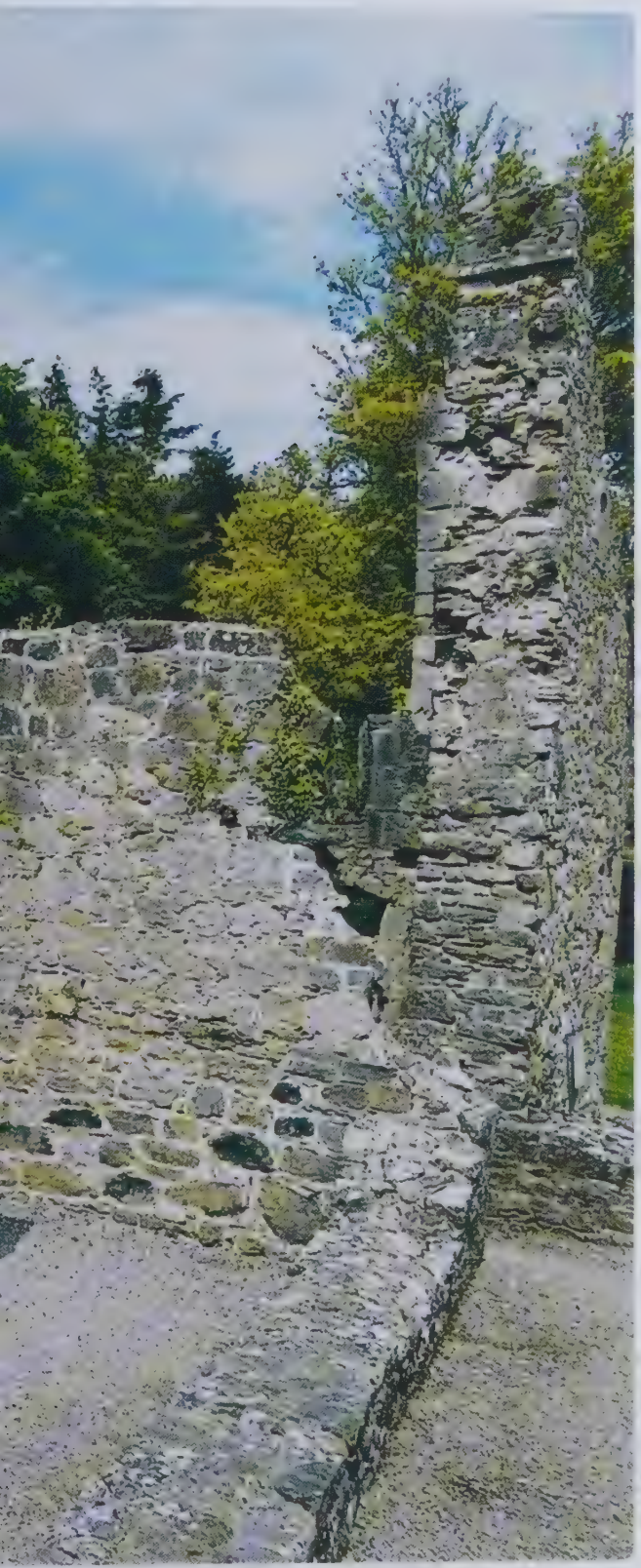
reached when the abbot ruled the territory while the bishop resided in the monastery, ordained the priesthood, confirmed the faithful, but had no jurisdiction.

It was scarcely a hundred years after St. Patrick's death when St. Brendan established himself at Clonfert, yet this monastic tendency of the Irish church had already made considerable headway and great monasteries were springing up all over the land, inspired by the pioneer foundation of St. Finnian of Clonard. The movement (though open to great abuses) was nevertheless to blossom in the seventh and eight centuries into the great missionary achievement, which helped to rescue the continent of Europe from barbarism.

Brendan and his successors in the early monastic period did not become the spiritual rulers of the whole territory of Hy Many. While it is true that to some extent in the east and the west, the boundaries of Hy Many and Clonfert coincided, nevertheless, there is a large portion of the tuath in the north and northwest, which lies outside the diocesan boundaries, and there is no evidence to show that at any period it lay within them. On the contrary, the same process which brought portion of Hy Many under the spiritual leadership of the monastery of Clonfert, was also operating from other monastic centres, notably that of St. Jarlath of Tuam and St. Kieran's of Clonmacnois. Tribal influence must have been very great indeed, for it is recorded in the *Registry of Clonmacnois* that large benefactions to Kieran's monastery were made by Cairbre Crom, Chief of Hy Many and sixth in descent from Máine Mór. These gifts include land in many places within the diocese of Clonfert.

Whether or not a true parochial system

Cloisters, Old Dominican Friary, Portumna



existed in the area at that early period or until the twelfth century is doubtful. We do know, however, that there were churches in plenty and the needs of the faithful were fully catered for. In close proximity, for instance, to St. Grellan's early foundation at Kilcooney lay the seventh century foundation of St. Raelan at Tuaim Sruthra and that of St. Bóadán at Cluain Tuaiscirt, founded in the ninth century. Cill Chonaill is reputed to have been founded in the fifth century. In fact, scattered over the whole diocese are the ruins or sites of *"cills"* and *"cillins"*, the origins of which are lost in antiquity. All that remains of their history are the names of their holy founders or in some cases nothing at all.

St. Brendan, we are told, lived at Clonfert for twenty years. Death, however, came to him, not there, but in the nunnery of Brigga, his sister at Annaghdown. According to the *Annals of the Four Masters* and the *Chronicum Scotorum*, this was in the year 576, though other sources put it in 583. He wished to be buried in Clonfert and so thither his remains were taken in secret, lest the men of the west claim the remains of the great saint who had died among them. In Clonfert he lies awaiting the resurrection in a grave, the location of which is guessed at but not accurately known.

The School of Clonfert

Perhaps the last surviving piece of the Shrine that contained the relics of Cummian Fada and Moenu, from Clonfert Cathedral

The monastery and school of Clonfert was like Clonard, Bangor, and Clonmacnoise, one of the principal monastic schools in ancient Ireland, offering what, in those days, corresponded to a modern university education. It enjoyed international fame and thousands of native students along with many from Britain and Europe came to study near its sanctuary. Even in the sixteenth century its prestige remained, for Elizabeth, sought to build there a school *for the education, training and instruction of youths and students... in the cultivation of virtue and religion* because it was the centre of Ireland and on account of its ancient fame and renown. Her councillors, however, would not have it so and thus, Trinity College was built in Dublin in 1591.

The school of Clonfert was to flourish for three hundred years, until the coming of the Norsemen.

Oratory, Emmanuel House of Providence

The Growth of the Diocese

The diocese extended gradually from its centre at Clonfert, according as different small states, or sub-divisions of them acknowledged the spiritual rulership of Brendan. To define this territory accurately, before the eleventh century, is difficult, because the boundaries of the civil divisions of our country changed from time to time. They were sometimes in dispute and even when they were undisputed at the time, may not be recorded in such documents as exist today. In attempting to fix the territory of the diocese a thousand years ago, we must remember that ancient Irish dioceses coincided almost exactly with the territories of well-known clans or dynasties. It is the general belief, while there is not sufficient evidence to support it, that Clonfert was co-extensive with Hy Many or the O'Kelly country, as suggested earlier.

The boundaries of Hy Many have been already outlined, but those boundaries correspond to the time when the power of the Uí Máine dynasty was at its zenith. The territory varied at different times according to the fortunes of the dynasty in war and diplomacy, and it is likely the territory of the diocese varied to some extent accordingly. The extent of Clonfert as we know it at present, bears little relation to that of Hy Many in the ninth century, being in area roughly half the size of the latter territory. Nonetheless, while it may be impossible to know the extent of the diocese in its early years, we know its boundaries in the twelfth century. Many abuses had arisen in the church, due to the Norse wars and the civil struggle that followed them. Many incongruities in diocesan boundaries had their origin in the old monastic system of government and efforts were made, time and again, to do away with them by abolishing the monastic system and restoring the diocesan system of government established by St. Patrick.

Many synods were held for this purpose, one of the most important of these being the *Synod*

Detail, the West Doorway, Clontuskert Abbey (from left to right) St Michael the Archangel, St John the Baptist, St Catherine and St Augustine

of Rathbreassail, believed to be near Banteer in County Cork, in the year 1111. The synod was summoned to restore the diocesan episcopate, to define the boundaries of the dioceses and to abolish the centuries-old custom of consecrating bishops for very small sees, or with no sees at all *(chorepiscopi)*. This synod gives us the first official list of Irish dioceses.

Following the ancient political division of Ireland into Leath Chuinn (Northern half) and Leath Mhogha (Southern half)– the Eiscir Riada running from Dublin to Clarinbridge in County Galway, was the dividing line – the synod divided the country into two ecclesiastical provinces, Armagh and Cashel. In each province it was agreed there were to be twelve bishoprics and two in Meath. Clonfert was one of the twenty- six dioceses mentioned and it was a suffrage see of Armagh. Its boundaries were defined as follows: *From the Shannon to the Burrin and from Echtghe to the Suck.*

There is little doubt that *Echtghe* is the present Slieve Eachta, but where is *Burrin?* If it means the barren rocky hills of the Burren that separate the diocese of Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora, then Clonfert embraced, in the early twelfth century, the territory that now forms the former diocese of Kilmacduagh. This diocese was established by St. Colman c.620. Extant are the names of the bishops who ruled it up to 967 but there is no record of any bishop of Kilmacduagh from that time up until the Synod of Kells in 1152. As it does not appear on the list of dioceses drawn up by the Synod of Rathbreasail, it is possible that sometime between 967 and 1111, Kilmacduagh had become incorporated with Clonfert.

Fr MacErlean SJ, giving a detailed account of the Synod writes: *Clonfert included the present dioceses of Clonfert and Kilmacduagh... the Synod reckoned Kilmacduagh to the diocese of Clonfert and assigned, seemingly, Kilfenora to Ceall Dalua (Killaloe).* The Synod, however, merely suggested the divisions, leaving it to the discretion of the Connaught clergy to alter them if they so willed, provided that the total number of dioceses in the province remained the same. This would seem to be an admission of the Synod's inability to enforce its decrees west of the Shannon.

OUR LADY OF LOURDES, CREAGH

Confirmation ceremony, St Michael's, Ballinasloe, c. 1944

We do know that many of the changes ordered elsewhere were never carried out for as historian Gougaud writes *the execution of the Synods arrangements was hampered in many places by local rivalries, wars, political changes and probably above all, by the resistance of the great abbeys, which for centuries had been centres of religious life and of learning and whose prestige and interests were seriously infringed by the new order of things.* At any rate Kilmacduagh did not remain for any length of time a part of Clonfert, because in the list drawn up at the *Synod of Kells* in 1152, only 41 years after Rathbreasail, Kilmacduagh appears as a separate diocese. Even portions of present day Clonfert are outside the boundaries laid down at Rathbreasail. The parish of Taughmaconnell, the half parish of Creagh (both east of the river Suck and in County Roscommon), and the parish of Lusmagh beyond the Shannon are ignored in the Rathbreasail reckoning. Yet Taughmaconnel and Lusmagh were both in Clonfert as we know from the *Ecclesiastical Taxation list* of 1302. Then, as now, the Archbishopric of Tuam held an island parish in the centre of Clonfert, the parish of Kilmeen.

The historical reason for this may go back to a very early date. It is believed that the tribes of the Sodhan's were evangelised by Tuam and Kilbennan. In the parish of Kilmeen lived an isolated branch of the Sodhan, the O'Dugans of Ballyduggan, who may have always retained the spiritual connection with Tuam.

Bishop Mac Graith, Clonfert Cathedral

The Synod of Kells

The *Synod of Kells*, held in 1152, is of the greatest importance, because the re-organisation of the Irish diocese made there remains to the present day with some minor modifications. It was summoned to complete the work begun at Rathbreasail. It recognised thirty-two dioceses and four Metropolitan sees Armagh, Cashel, Dublin and Tuam.

Here it may be interesting to note how Dublin and Tuam became Metropolitan Sees. Dublin, a Norse colony, had become an important city and when in 1040 it sought a bishop of its own it was to Canterbury and not Armagh that it looked. Henceforward for many years the diocese of Dublin was attached to the Province of Canterbury. It was so recognised at the Synod of Rathbreasail, although as early as 1074, it had been making gestures of independence by styling itself *"the metropolis of the island of Ireland"*. The growing importance of the city, coupled with the anomalous position of the diocese, may have prompted its elevation at the Synod of Kells to the dignity of the Archbishopric and Metropolitan see of Leinster, thus incorporating it in the general scheme of reform of the Irish Church. When this was decided upon, Rory O'Connor, the Ard-Rí, demanded that his native province Connacht should have its own Metropolitan. His request was granted and Tuam was selected as the Metropolitan see. It is regrettable that a more exact account cannot be given of the establishment of Clonfert as a diocese, of the extent of its territory in its early years, or when its boundaries were contracted from without. This, however, is certain: the extent of the diocese today is the same as it was in the thirteenth century, when the De Burgos invaded Connacht.

Blessed Brendan of the Sea,
St Brendan's Cathedral Porch

Sacred Heart, Kilconnell

St Catherine's, Aughrim

Clonfert in Medieval Times

Every diocese in Ireland is said to touch either the sea or the Shannon, to enable the bishop a free and unfettered access to Rome. A free exit, however, usually means a free entrance, and when by the seacoast and by the Shannon, the Norsemen began their onslaught in 795, all Irish dioceses suffered. They pillaged, plundered and wantonly burned churches, schools and monasteries. Clonfert was one of the first monasteries to suffer and until 1179, it was plundered four times and burnt down on six occasions. We are told that in 838 Turgesius and a large fleet plundered and burnt Clonfert, Clonmacniois, and all the monasteries and churches from Lanesborough to Limerick. In 869 Earl Tomrar and his marauders put to the sword all they found hiding in church and cemetery, but divine retribution played a hand and reportedly *he died of madness* three days afterwards. In.949 Ceallachan, King of Cashel also plundered the monastery. Later Irish chiefs did not spare it either in their own internecine wars. In 1031, Art O'Rorke alias *The Cock* plundered the monastery and the *Annals of Loch Cé* tell us that the O'Kelly's plundered Clonmacnois and Clonfert in 1065.

The Norse wars were almost continuous for over two hundred years until they were routed at Clontarf in 1014. It is of interest to note that the Hy Manians, at least 600 strong, fought at Clontarf and that their chief Tadhg O'Kelly lost his live fighting on the side of Brian Boru. After Clontarf there was for a century and a half a continuing war between the Irish chiefs for the kingdom of Ireland. It was not until 1168 that the unity of the country was effected and Rory O'Connor, King of Connacht, was acknowledged as Ard-Rí. He was the last king of Ireland as three or four years later saw the invasion of the Anglo - Normans.

When peace came in the wake of Clontarf, every effort was made to abolish abuses, which had arisen in the church during the long years of the Norse Wars. Many synods were convened for this purpose, of which we have already mentioned Rathbreasail and Kells. Another was held in Clonfert in 1170, presided over by St. Laurence O'Toole. Celechar O'Carmody was bishop of Clonfert and Peter O'More was Abbot. The *Annals of the Four Masters* record that Peter O'More, abbot was drowned in the Shannon on December 27th, 1171. Together with the correction of abuses there was a resurgence of the Irish Church, not withstanding the many internal or civil wars. A new style of architecture was evolved, the Irish Romanesque, which was an enrichment of the continental Romanesque of the period. Its finest extant specimens are Cormac's chapel at Cashel, consecrated in 1134, and the hauntingly beautiful doorway of Clonfert Cathedral.

We have, fortunately, an almost compete list of the bishops, who ruled Clonfert from Brendan to the present day, and we know something of the religious, who worked and prayed within its borders. In this sketch a very few words must suffice for the orders. In the beginning Brendan and his monks lived a communal life under a rule, the rule of Brendan.

When, centuries afterwards, the mendicant orders were recognised in the church, the following had foundations in the diocese. In 1280 the De Burgo family established the Carthusians in Cinéal Fheichín in the present half parish of Abbey. It was a Charter House and was the only foundation of the order in Ireland. They remained only a short time, and in 1321 their monastery passed into the hands of the Franciscans. At the same time a house of the Knights Templar was established nearby, in the now ruined Castle of Coolfin. There were Cistercians in Portumna and Canons Regular of St. Augustine in Clontuskert, before the Carmelites were established in Loughrea in 1300 by the De Burgo family. Shortly afterwards the Franciscans and Dominicans arrived.

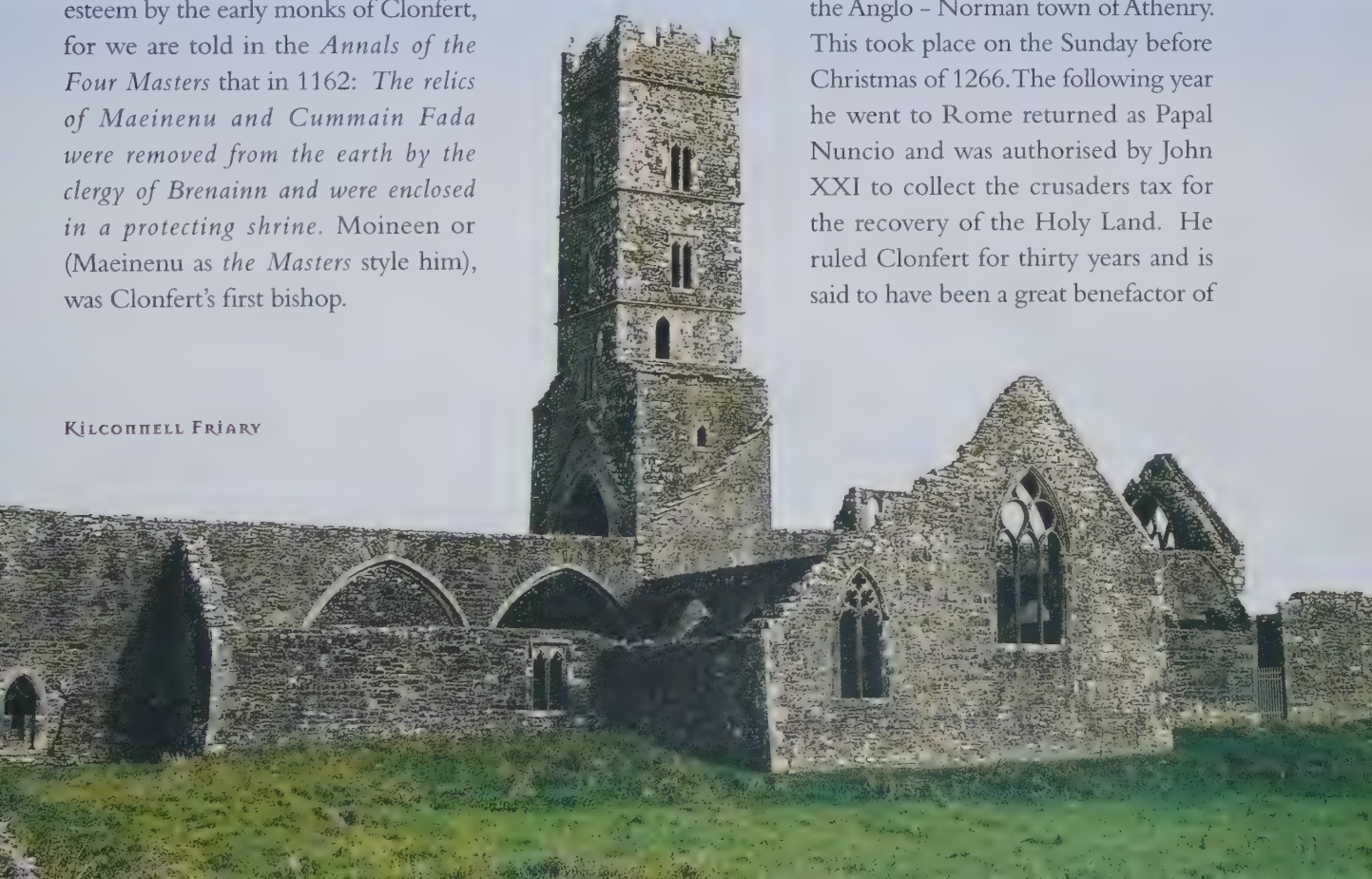
The Franciscans were established by William O'Kelly in Kilconnel in 1353 and the Dominicans were established in Portumna in the year 1426 by O'Madden. A vague tradition in Tynagh parish holds that there was a Carmelite foundation briefly at Pallas, but there was never

more than one foundation of the Cistercians or the Carthusians. The Dominicans and Franciscans, however, had several, and the ruins of many of them today testify to the magnitude and beauty of the original buildings. As we shall see, many Dominicans, Franciscans and a few Augustinians occupied the throne of Brendan. The orders, in fact, were never habitually in charge of parishes in the diocese. In times of persecution, however, when priests, whether regular or diocesan, were few and, to avoid arrest were continually on the move, the regulars had the usual faculties of diocesan priests and exercised them, whenever necessary, throughout the country. Even on a few occasions they were appointed Parish Priests for a short time until there were diocesan priests to take charge.

The more outstanding bishops of Clonfert may be listed, together with some account of their lives. Cummian Fada was the third successor of Brendan. He was Abbot and bishop and one of the most learned of all the scholars of the seventh century. In 632 he wrote a noteworthy letter, which is extant, to the abbot of Iona on the Paschal question, a controversy which dogged the Gaelic church of the time. This letter showed him to be well versed in sacred scripture and church history. He was also well skilled in the latest theology of his time, as his *Liber de Mensura Puenitentiarum* clearly shows. He was obviously held in high esteem by the early monks of Clonfert, for we are told in the *Annals of the Four Masters* that in 1162: *The relics of Maeinenu and Cummain Fada were removed from the earth by the clergy of Brenainn and were enclosed in a protecting shrine.* Moineen or (Maeinenu as *the Masters* style him), was Clonfert's first bishop.

In some instances the list of bishops of the diocese conflict, most probably due to the fact that in the minds of the Annalists the episcopal and abbatial successors of Brendan were not clearly distinguished. Muircearteach O'Carmacain died as Bishop of Clonfert c 1204 after which there is a lacuna in the lists of nearly half a century. That there was, however, a Bishop is clear from the issue of Papal mandates to him at intervals between 1200 and 1245. A Bishop Thomas died in 1248 and on May 27th, 1249, King Henry _ granted licence for the election of a successor who was doubtless Cormac O'Luimluin whose death is recorded in the Annals in 1259 and who is described as *the chief sage of Erinn* and *a holy senior.* He died before July 20th of that year on which date Henry gave licence to the Dean and Chapter to elect a bishop in his place. Their choice was the Dean of Clonfert, Thomas O'Kelly, of the reigning house of Hy Many and a son of the Chief, Domhnall Mór O'Kelly. He ruled the diocese for only four years, dying on the Feast of the Epiphany, 1263. He was interred in the church of the Dominican convent in Athenry, of which he had been a benefactor.

John de Alatro, an Italian, was bishop in 1266. He was sent from Rome as bishop elect, probably with the sanction of the King of England, but as he could not be inducted to his sea without the help of Walter De Burgo, he was consecrated in the Anglo - Norman town of Athenry. This took place on the Sunday before Christmas of 1266. The following year he went to Rome returned as Papal Nuncio and was authorised by John XXI to collect the crusaders tax for the recovery of the Holy Land. He ruled Clonfert for thirty years and is said to have been a great benefactor of



Kilconnell Friary

St Patrick's, Derrybrien

the Cathedral. He was obviously a very competent man as Edward I commanded Hugh de Kendal on August 24th 1284 to recommend him by letters under the Great Seal to the Supreme Pontiff and to pray his holiness to extend special grace and favour to him, and to elevate him with congruous honours. The King was, no doubt, pleased that John's fundraising activities had made his own treasury agreeably replete as from the very beginning, the justiciary was borrowing from those monies, to expedite arduous affairs of the King. The feelings of the Irish, however, are not recorded. His promotion did not come until 1296, when he was elevated to the Archbishopric of Benevento and later Capua.

De Alatro's successor was Robert, an English Benedictine monk of Christchurch, Canterbury. He was vice-treasurer of Ireland in the years 1299 and 1300 and has the distinction of being the only Englishman to rule in Clonfert. He died in 1307 and the election of a successor, once again, fell to the lot of the Clonfert chapter. On the feast of St. George, by common consent, they chose the Dean of the Cathedral, Gregory O'Brogii. He ruled the see for eleven years until his death in 1319. The striving for mastery by Gael and Anglo - Norman is reflected in the appointments of these years. John de Alatro served the joint interests of the papacy and Edward I. Both he and his successor Robert of Canterbury were papal appointees. The latter an official of the Anglo - Norman government, was doubtless chosen through the influence of the King. Where the dean and the chapter had the choice, they had hitherto selected a bishop of Irish stock. The Anglo - Norman clergy were apparently not as yet in sufficient numbers in the diocese to sway the chapter in their favour, but O'Brogii's death provided the occasion for a trial of strength.

It was, in any event a period of great confusion and disorder in Christendom, due to the Babylonian Captivity of the popes in Avignon (1304-1377) and the Great Western Schism (1378 – 1417), which rent the church in the years following the papacy's return to Rome. Strange as it seems, the disorder was reflected in Clonfert and just as we find Pope and Anti-Pope in the Universal Church, we find at this period, bishop and anti-bishop in the Church of Clonfert! When the see once again fell vacant in 1319, there appeared two bishops in the diocese, Robert Le Petit, a Franciscian and John O'Leain, Archdeacon of Tuam and yet Canon of Clonfert(!!) It appears Robert was chosen by the Dean and Chapter, but he was deposed after two years and John came into peaceful possession of the diocese in 1322, the intruder Robert *having taken flight*. We find the fugitive Robert as Bishop of Annaghdown in 1325. Thomas O'Kelly, a secular priest of the diocese, succeeded John in October of 1347 and in 1378 another diocesan priest, Mauritius or Muircheartach O'Kelly succeeded him. This man seems to have presented something of a problem at the time. After six years as Bishop of Clonfert, he was in 1394 transferred to Tuam, and the Archbishop thereof William O'Cormacain, transferred to Clonfert. O'Cormacain, of course, refused the exchange, deeming it a downgrading. As a result David Corre, a Franciscan was appointed Bishop of Clonfert in his place in 1398. O'Kelly went to Tuam and died there as Archbishop in 1407.

The *Book of Ui Máine or the Book of O'Kelly* was written for this Mauritus O'Kelly while he was still Bishop of Clonfert. One can understand why O'Cormacain was so indignant at the suggestion of a change which on the surface appeared like a demotion. It must, however, be understood that at this period and for a century or so afterwards, Clonfert was one of the wealthiest sees in Ireland, outside the city bishoprics, and was much wealthier than Tuam. The wealth came from the large estates of fertile land, with which the O'Kelly's, the De Burgos and others endowed the monastery and the see of Clonfert. The payments made to the Holy See, by newly elected bishops on their appointments were 300 florins in gold for Clonfert and 200 for Tuam, according to a scale fixed by the Roman Authorities in 1392.

Yet back in 1291 Pope Nicholas IV had assessed taxation of the sees of the Province of Tuam on the following scale:

Tuam:	*Bishop's Revenue*	*£ 115-6-11*
Clonfert:	*Bishop's Revenue*	*£ 66-13-0*
Achonry:	*Bishop's Revenue*	*£ 14-0-0*
Killala:	*Spiritualities (40 marks)*	*£ 26-3-4*
	Commiunia(5marks)	*£ 3-6-8*
Kilmacduagh:	*Spiritualities (40marks)*	*£ 26-3-4.*
	Commiunia (5marks)	*£ 3-6-8.*
	Temporalities	*£ 26-3-4.*

Money may have been forty or so times more valuable than now. In Queen Elizabeth's time the estimated value of the Tuam sees was as follows:

Tuam:	*In temporalities*	*£50-0-0*
	In benefices	*£ 104-14-0*
Clonfert:	*In temporalities*	*£ 24-0-0*
	In benefices	*£ 111-06-0*
Achonry:	*In temporalities*	*£ 10-0-0*
	In benefices	*£ 16-00-0*
Killala:	*In temporalities*	*£ 23-6-8*
	In benefices	*£ 44-00-0.*

Elphin is not mentioned in either list and Galway was not a diocese until 1831. In early 1438 Bishop Thomas O'Kelly was transferred from Clonfert to Tuam and replaced in the see by John O Heyne, an Irish Friar Minor. O'Heyne was a native of the diocese and had an interesting career. In November 1437 he is to be found at the court of King Henry VI, who dispatched him as messenger to the prelates assembly at Basel, to the German Emperor Sigismund and to Pope Eugenius IV. While the record of where he had studied is now lost, he was apparently a professor and Bachelor of Theology. However, in the confusion that reigned in fifteenth century papal administration, John White took provision of the see before O'Heyne could get there! White had been minister provincial of the Friars Minors in Ireland, but was deposed by his brethren for bad governance in 1441. Anxious to secure himself in a good ecclesiastical position he made his way to Rome and was appointed to the see of Clonfert. O'Heyne was forced to take up a position as an auxiliary bishop in England in order to earn a livelihood. He died as vicar of the small parish of West Thurrock near London in 1459, never having succeeded in coming back to his native diocese as its bishop. The late Fr. Aubrey Gwynn S.J. provides a nice finish to his story. *He says He may perhaps have been a disappointed and*

St Joseph's, Ballinakill

Peter & Paul, Ballymacward

St Michael's Gurteen

St Michael's, Cappataglе

Our Lady of Lourdes, Kilreekil

St Augustine's, Clontuskert

embittered man, but I prefer to think of him as an elderly prelate who had at last secured a living in England, and who could entertain his guests at table with tales of the great days twenty years ago when he had been a royal messenger to the German Emperor, to two rival councils of the Church, and to the kindly, if not over-efficient Pope Eugeinus IV.

In 1482 we find Matthew MacCraith as bishop. He was an Augustinian and in all probability, was at first Bishop of Killaloe, but for some reason his appointment to that see was annulled in 1468. He ruled Clonfert for twenty-six years, and died in 1508 at the Abbey in Kilbocht in the half -parish of Kilreekil. There remains for the 21st Century historian, two relics of great interest to remind us of him. The great western doorway of Clontuskert Abbey, one of the most outstanding examples of 15th century Irish Gothic Architecture, bears the effigy of a bishop, together with the Latin inscription *Matthew, by the Grace of God, Bishop of Clonfert, and Patrick O'Neacdauyn a Canon of his house had me made. A.D.1471.* The other is a beautiful little chalice, now preserved in the ecclesiastical museum in the grounds of St. Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea. Around the cup is engraven in Gothic lettering *Matthew Mac Craith epus Clonfertensis me Fieri fecit.* His successor, David de Burgo, was appointed on July 5th, 1508, but died on his way home from Rome to take possession of the diocese.

The De Burgo family in Clonfert

Holy Family, Clostoken

The History of Clonfert diocese is so closely connected with that of the De Burgos for about five hundred years, that it is necessary to know something of them. Indeed, many of the name appear as Bishops of the diocese. Briefly, they were descendants of one William de Burgo, brother of Hubert de Burgo, Justicior of England who came over with King John in 1185. William received grants of large tracts of land in north Tipperary along the Shannon opposite Clare. He set up his castle or stronghold at Castleconnel, married an Irish princess, the daughter of Donal Mór O'Brien of Munster, and had two sons. In 1205 he crossed the Shannon and the lands of all Connacht were given to him by King John, in open violation of the *Treaty of Windsor,* made in 1175, between Henry II and Ard- Rí Rory O'Connor. St. Laurence O'Toole, Catholicus O'Duffy (Archbishop of Tuam) and Concors (Abbot of Clonfert) were the three plenipotentiaries sent by the Ard- Rí to conclude that Treaty.

William divided Connacht between his two sons, Richard taking the portion between the Corrib and the Shannon and Walter getting the northern part of the province. The portion occupied by Richard, as his name was written at the time, was called Clan-Ricard and hence the name *Clanrickarde*. He established his headquarters at Loughrea, made it his capital and built his castle there in 1232. His other chief residences within the diocese were at Kilcooley and Portumna. The latter came to him by his marriage with Lady More O'Madden, who is described by the *Four Masters as Patron of the literati, the poor and the needy of Ireland*.

The De Burgo family lived all over the province, as the ruins of many castles testify. The O'Connors, Kings of Connacht, who fought them hard and long for supremacy, were utterly and bloodily defeated in the decisive battle of Athenry, which took place on August 10th ,.1316. The

Our Lady of the Assumption, Abbey

De Burgos became great feudal lords, ruling their estates and their vassals with almost monarchical power. They became enormously wealthy and, even as late as the end of the sixteenth century, as we know from the *Composition of Connacht* in 1585, the revenues of the Earl of Clanricard in this province were greater than those of the king. The De Burgos soon assimilated the Irish culture as, in the period following the Anglo - Norman invasion, they adopted Irish language, dress, laws and customs and intermarried with the families of the Irish chiefs. It was the rulers of Clanricard that the Parliament of Kilkenny had in mind when passing laws forbidding such intercourse with the native Irish.

It was, of course, only natural that the Anglo - Normans would, over time, succumb to the Irish culture, which surrounded them. This was accentuated by the gradual waning of English influence in Ireland from the end of the thirteenth century up to the time of Henry VIII and the growing consciousness of nationality. But the conversion was only superficial. As far as can be judged, the Lord of Clanricard's heart was always in his lands but his soul remained in England.

Granted, a Clanricard fought at Aughrim, but one may surmise that it was for King James rather than Ireland. Indeed, someone once said that the De Burgos and indeed all the Anglo - Norman families were prepared to risk their lives for the faith, but not prepared to risk their lands for anything on earth or in heaven. When the parliament of the Pale acknowledged Henry VIII as King of Ireland in 1541 he bestowed many titles on the Irish and Anglo - Norman chiefs. Ulick de Burgo became in 1543 Earl of Clanricard and Baron of Dunkellin. This man *Ulick na gCeann* or *Ulick of the heads* is thought to have sacrificed his religion to curry favour with Henry VIII. Ulick derived his strange soubriquet from his penchant for displaying the decapitated heads of his victims on stakes. At the confiscation of the monasteries, he got the buildings and lands of the Via Nova or Abbeygormican Abbey in the present parish of Mullagh and Killoran. His son, the second Earl, who was certainly a Catholic, was granted most of the confiscated monasteries within the diocese: Aughrim, Clontuskert, Loughrea, and Kilbocht, falling to his share.

The prominent part played by the Earl and his family in Catholic and Irish affairs in the seventeenth century will be seen later. It came to an end with the disastrous Jacobite war in 1691 when his land was confiscated. When the Earl regained his freedom and his lands in 1703, he retired to his castle at Kilcooley and henceforth lived as a large landed proprietor under the new regime.

Aughrim's great disaster, which marked the destruction of Irish hopes established the fortunes of another family - Protestant this time, which because of its connection with the diocese, merits mention. The Trench family, Earls of Clancarty, were the owners of *The Pines* which trained evangelical aspirants to the ministry in the Irish Language. For the first twenty-three years of the twentieth century it served as the diocesan college and now is a residential area. Their dower house is now the episcopal residence, while the present diocesan college occupies since 1923, their mansion seat at Garbally Park. They were a family of French Huguenot extraction, who took their name from the Seigneurie of La Tranche in Poitou. Their ancestor, Frederic de la Tranche, settled in Northumberland, about the year 1574 and they appeared in Ireland about the year 1605. During the succeeding century, they acquired Garbally, together with vast estates in the Counties of Cavan, Galway, Mayo, Roscommon and Westmeath. They were established in their lands by letters patent from Charles II. Frederick Trench and his brother John, a clergyman, gave useful information to the Williamites before and during the Battle of Aughrim. During the succeeding century, their political star was in the ascendant and in 1802 William Trench was granted an Earldom, his reward for voting for the Union. The extinct Earldom of Clancarty was re-conferred on him, by reason of his descent from Elena McCarthy,

wife of David Power of Coorheen, who herself was descended from a sister of Donough MacCarthy Mór, Earl of Clancarty.

Immaculate Conception, Kilconieran

Holy Family, Duniry

St Therese welcomed to Loughrea

From the Reformation to Cromwell

St Brendan's, Eyrecourt

The English Kings, from the very beginning, claimed the right of nomination or *presentation* to all Irish sees, even though their authority was for centuries confined to the Pale. In the Bull *Laudabiliter* of Adrian IV in 1155, Henry II of England was styled *Dominus Hibernae* and was probably given the privilege of presentation. This was not peculiar to Ireland. It was the practice in England, and indeed, in almost every catholic country. It is curious that the Irish chiefs raised no protest. This privilege, it seems, they never requested and it was never granted to them. The English kings exercised it as long as they remained Catholic. James II, in exile after the battle Aughrim in 1691, exercised it from Rome and his son the *Old Pretender* or James III, who died in 1766, was the last English sovereign to be granted this privilege by the Pope.

The procedure in exercising the privilege of presentation seems to have been the following: the King sent to the Pope the name of his choice for the vacant see, probably after consultation with the diocesan Chapter. The Pope had all necessary enquiries made as to the fitness and suitability of the candidate and, if he was satisfied as to his qualifications, he appointed him bishop-elect and sent him his Bulls.

These were presented or surrendered to the King. There was no spiritual significance in this as it was the official notification to the King that the person presenting the Bulls was appointed by the Pope. It was an act of fealty to the king by the bishop-elect, who, as bishop, had become a spiritual ruler of the realm. The King returned the bulls and at the same time, had royal mandate issued by which the new bishop became entitled to the temporalities of his see. This right of presentation was exercised, on the whole, in a satisfactory manner as long as the English kings remained Catholics, but when they broke with Rome and yet attempted to exercise the right, trouble was sure to arise, and arise it did in Clonfert.

Roland de Burgo, a nephew of the Earl of Clanricard was appointed Bishop by the Pope in 1534, but Henry VIII refused to give him temporalities of the see and, in his place, appointed a bishop of his own – an Augustinian, Richard de Nangle. This man, the first Protestant bishop of Clonfert was consecrated by George Browne,

Meelick, Church

Provincial of the English Augustinians, whom Henry in 1536 had appointed Archbishop of Dublin to propagate the new faith. Browne is reputedly the bishop who married Henry and Anne Boleyn and in consequence was awarded the Archbishopric of Dublin. De Nangle who was too scared to come to Clonfert, complained to Henry and orders were sent to the Lord Deputy to give him the temporalities of his see, but Henry's writ did not, at the time, effectively run in Clanricard territory and nothing was done. De Nangle was then appointed assistant to Browne in Dublin and, shortly afterwards, he

Our Lady of Clonfert Church

was appointed rector in Ardrahan, where he died in 1543. As Henry failed to place his nominee in Clonfert, he was prepared to recognise Roland and give him the temporalities, provided he took the Oath of Supremacy.

Did he take the oath? He certainly surrendered the Bulls to Henry but this proves nothing, as it was customary at the time.

When Edward VI came to the throne in 1547 another attempt was made to appoint a Protestant Bishop to Clonfert, but for many reasons, chief among which was the poverty of the see at that time (Clanricard had got possession from Henry of most if not all of the Abbey lands) no appointment was made. Roland wrote to the King to complain of his impecunious circumstances and requested the see of Elphin in addition to Clonfert. In response to this appeal, the king, in 1551, wrote to the Lord Deputy to grant the see of Elphin in commendem to Roland. This was done and for some years an extraordinary state of affairs prevailed, whereby, Roland held the two bishoprics in direct violation of the laws of the Church. When the Catholic Queen Mary came to the throne in 1553, he repented and surrendered the bishopric of Elphin. He was pardoned by the Queen and *"absolved"* by Cardinal Pole. It seems he had approached Pole to intercede on his behalf with the Queen.

When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558 he was not deposed and he remained Bishop of Clonfert for twenty-two years of her reign. Some have claimed he was, in fact, the first Protestant Bishop of Clonfert, that he converted in Henry's reign, and never returned to the Catholic Church, for otherwise he would not be permitted to remain for so long a catholic bishop under Elizabeth. In answer to that, it must be remembered that the Earl of Clanricard was allowed, for political and state reasons, to retain all his lands even though he was a known Catholic. Roland, after all, was his nephew! A short report sent to Rome in 1580 says there were fifteen sees occupied and none but the Bishops of Waterford and Clonfert took the Oath of Allegiance, and it may be added, the Oath of Supremacy. Roland died the same year having served as Bishop for 42 years. During his last years he lived in Tynagh where he enlarged the parish church and built a Castle in the neighbourhood. He endowed Tynagh Church with sufficient lands to support four priests, who were to say masses for the repose of his soul. He also erected in the Church a marble tomb on which were engraved the Clanricard arms and the arms of the Catholic Bishop of Clonfert, and under which he now rests. How much glory guards that particular Clanricard grave, is known only to the Lord!

Cemetery Mass, Killoran

The Penal Times

Eviction Scene

For almost three hundred years (1560-1829) penal enactments against Catholics remained on the statute books and were being constantly supplemented. Sometimes they were fiercely and systematically enforced; at other times they were allowed to remain dormant. Whenever the Catholic religion was tolerated as in the time of Charles I (1625-1649), bishops and priests came from their hiding places and began to build churches and schools, the friars and monks returning also to their old monasteries and abbeys.

In some districts, moreover, the Penal Laws were less vigorouslyimposed than in others and in this respect Clonfert was fortunate as, up to the beginning of the eighteenth century the Clanricard family remained Catholic. Seven years after Roland de Burgo's death we find a different kind of man carrying the Crosier of Brendan.

Thaddeus O'Farrell, a Dominican was bishop in 1587. Regarded by contemporaries as a saintly man, he was the first to establish in Ireland the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary and the first canonical election of this confraternity took place in Loughrea on March 29th, 1587. Between 1595 and 1601, he was in Spain as agent for O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, seeking aid from Phillip II and collecting money and arms for the Irish army. He returned to Ireland with the Spanish forces in 1601 and, worn out with age and labours, he died the same year in the Spanish camp during the Siege of Kinsale. It was about this time (1611) that the Franciscans set up an Irish printing press in their college at Louvain from which they sent a continual stream of books and pamphlets (in Irish, of course) back to Ireland for the greater edification of Catholics and the confusion of others. We

know also that in 1629 Michael O'Clery O.F.M on the track of old books visited Abbey to collect material for the writing of the *Annals of the Four Masters. The Leabhar Breac* was written towards the end of the fourteenth century and was kept at Duniry, where the MacAodhagáins had a famous law school. O'Clery tells us that this book is the most important treasury of our ancient ecclesiastical and theological writings in existence. As much as we would like to claim the writing of the *Leabhar Breac* for Duniry, it is more accurate to say that it was copied by some members of the Duniry school from older mss in Loughrea, and Clonmacnoise. The earliest date it can be connected with Duniry is 1544 and it was certainly there until 1597. It is now in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. While O'Clery was collecting materials for *the Annals* in the diocese, Robert Dawson, the Protestant Bishop of Clonfert and Kilmacduagh was reporting to the Lords Justices and this report made in 1641(just before the rising of that year) throws an interesting side-light on the Catholic Clonfert of the time. He complains that the Protestant bishops are unable to suppress the Popish schools *their jurisdiction being condemned and writs de excom capiend either not issued or never executed by the sheriff, who is for the most part a Papist. Those who spoke well of the (Protestant) evangelist were liable to be, and constantly were, unmercifully whipped.* He goes on to tell the Lords Justice, that there is in every parish a Popish priest and in most places a public mass house and altar, whither the people resort publicly every Sabbath and holiday. *There are* he continues *many religious houses for men* in his diocese (Clonfert), *the abbey of Kilconnell, the abbey of Meelick, the friars of which are repairing it having lived in the wood called Muckeny these many year, the abbey of Kinuliphin (sic) held by Franciscans and the abbey of Portumna which belonged to the Dominicans, who had a smaller house in Kibrought (sic).*

The insolence of the Friars is past bearing. To affront the (Protestant) clergy the more, they did not scruple to come abroad in their habits publicly to beg corn and sheep. *There are,* he goes on, *no nunneries we know of but diverse women go under the name of nuns and religious women dwelling near unto the said friars or in some forms abroad in the country who kept houses to entertain the priest and friars in their travel or when they go abroad to beg.* A few years later we hear of a university in Esker, where three hundred students attended lectures given by Dominicans, who were all educated in the universities of Europe.

After the death of Thaddeus O'Farrell at Kinsale in 1601, the diocese was governed not by bishops but by Vicars Apostolic for some forty years. There were many reasons for this. One was the difficulty of getting Bulls from Rome. Another was that, as soon as it became known that a bishop had come to rule his diocese, the priest-hunter was on his heels and persecution usually broke out in the district. The people, however, became dissatisfied that the sees remained vacant. There were few bishops in Ireland and most dioceses were governed by Vicars Apostolic and application was made to Rome to have Bishops consecrated. One of these is regarded as being one of the most astute of the Bishops of Clonfert, John De Burgo. He had two brothers, Oliver and Hugh and all three held prominent places in the church.

Our Lady Consoler of the Afflicted, Fahy

Christ the King, Quansboro

The De Burgo Brothers

St Patrick's, Fohenagh

Killure Church – St Teresa's

Oliver, a Dominican, was the first Rector of the Dominican college in Louvain. This was the time of the Confederation of Kilkenny and right through its dark, as well as its bright days, Oliver, unlike John and Hugh, remained faithful to the Nuncio. After the failure of the Confederation he fled to France, and remained there until the restoration of Charles II, when he returned to Ireland and spent his remaining years with his kinsman, the Earl of Clanricard. He died in 1671.

Hugh was a Franciscan and was reputedly one of the most brilliant students in the Franciscan college of Louvain, where he was educated. He was commissioned by the Confederates to represent Ireland at several royal courts of Europe and put before these courts that the struggle in Ireland was for religion, country, liberty and Justice. He visited the courts of Spain, Holland, Belgium, Austria, and others.

St Joseph's, Killimor

Next to Luke Wadding O.F.M., Hugh the most successful diplomatic representative of the Confederates on the Continent, both in propaganda for Ireland's cause and in procuring help – money, guns and ammunition for the struggle. He was back in Ireland in 1647, the year his brother, John, became Archbishop of Tuam. Every effort was made by John to have him as his successor in Clonfert, but the Nuncio strongly opposed the appointment, on the grounds amongst others that it was inadvisable to have two brothers occupy, at the same time, the two wealthiest sees in the Province of Tuam. Needless to say, the brothers were not to forget the Nuncio for this, and later John de Burgo became his implacable opponent. Hugh was appointed Bishop of Kilmacduagh and Walter Lynch became Bishop of Clonfert. When Galway surrendered to Cromwell's forces, Hugh managed to escape and in 1656 he went to England where he died the same year.

John, however, is the most celebrated of the three brothers. Born at Pallas in 1590, he was educated in the Irish college at Lisbon, where he read a distinguished course and was awarded a doctorate in theology. He was a diocesan priest and after his ordination he returned home to work in Clonfert. After a short time he was appointed Vicar Apostolic and remained so for fifteen years, until 1642, when he was appointed Bishop. His consecration in the Abbey of Cinéal Fhéichín the same year was the first public consecration of a bishop in Ireland for over a century and the celebration caused intense joy throughout the diocese.

The Earl of Clanricard and other magnates were present and the consecrating prelate was Malachy O'Queely, Archbishop of Tuam. This man was a prominent figure in both national and ecclesiastical affairs. A few years after consecrating John de Burgo, he headed the Confederate Army and in a skirmish with the Parliamentary army under Sir Charles Coote, at Ballysodare in 1647, he was killed. When the public celebrations of John's consecration were over, Slieve Eachta, at whose foot lies Cinéal Fhéichín, was ablaze with bonfires.

He also sat as one of the spiritual peers of the realm in the National Parliament of Kilkenny and signed the decree of the National Council held in May 1642, declaring that the war begun the year before was a lawful and just war waged in defence of the Catholic religion and of the just and legitimate liberties and rights of Ireland.

Fr. Peter Scaramfi arrived in 1643 as representative of the Pope, bringing with him money and arms collected largely in Brussels. Scaramfi worked hard to unite the conflicting parties, the old Irish and the Anglo-Irish. He urged them to continue the war until full liberty of the practice of their religion was granted, insisting that they should not be satisfied with mere toleration. The prospects were so bright that the pope considered the confederation deserved a more formal recognition.

Immaculate Conception, Tiranascragh

Lisheen or Children's Burial Ground, Mullagh

Scaramfi was recalled and Rinnuccini, Archbishop of Fermo, reached Ireland in October 1644 as Apostolic Nuncio. When Scaramfi left Ireland, he took with him a few young men who were going to Rome to study for the priesthood. Oliver Plunkett was one of them.

Rinnuccini also brought with him, money, arms and ammunition and like Scaramfi, worked with all his might to effect a close and lasting union of the conflicting parties in the Confederation. He favoured the old Irish party, who demanded the freedom of the country, the unfettered practice of their religion and the restoration to the chieftains and the monasteries of all their confiscated lands, whereas the Anglo-Irish party asked for mere toleration of their religion and were, naturally, opposed to surrendering the monastery lands. Ulick de Burgo, Earl of Clanricard who remained a Royalist all through the trouble, never joined the Confederates, but it should be borne in mind that he held within the boundaries of Clonfert the monastery lands of Aughrim, Clontuskert, Loughrea, Kilbocht, Clonfert and Meelick.

After an interview in Ulick De Burgo's Loughrea castle with Sir Lucas Dillon and the O'Connor Don, who invited and urged him to join the Confederates, he refused to give a definite answer. When they had gone Ulick cynically and tellingly entered in his notebook when he had

described the interview, *I was born in Clanricard House, Lincoln Inns Fields, London.* When news of the great victory of Benburb (1646) reached Kilkenny there was in the Cathedral a Solemn High Mass of thanksgiving presided over by the Nuncio. In the Choir was John de Burgo. Next year he was appointed Archbishop of Tuam in succession to Malachy O'Queely. He blamed the Nuncio that his brother Hugh did not succeed him in Clonfert, and he began to oppose him in the deliberations of the Supreme Council, to undermine his influence with the leaders and thus make it more difficult for him to get the old Irish and the Anglo-Irish parties to work together in the Confederation. Very probably he was a tool in the hands of the able and wily Earl Ulick. The Nuncio in a letter to Rome complains that John de Burgo is *the stiffest and most obdurate of all the bishops* in opposing his authority. Treachery was at work all the time within and without the Supreme Council. Ormond, the English Kings' Deputy surrendered in 1647 and two years later he concluded an armistice with the Puritans. The Nuncio excommunicated all who would accept the armistice and, it is said the Archbishop excommunicated all who refused to accept it! Confusion reigned in the Supreme Council. The Nuncio had to flee Kilkenny and we find him first in Kilmeen, near Slieve Bloom, and then in Galway by Clanricard, but he escaped in February of 1649 and sailed for home. Six months later Cromwell arrived in Dublin.

In 1650 Cromwell appointed Clanricard Lord Deputy in succession to Ormond with authority to govern the kingdom of Ireland. He was the only catholic permitted to hold from the Crown any office of honour or trust. Ormond had been called upon to resign his post by the council of the Confederation and sentence of excommunication was promulgated against all his adherents. John de Burgo was one of the signatories to the sentence. On December 7th of the same year the Supreme Council of the Confederation met in Loughrea and issued a decree proclaiming the Virgin Mary *Mother of God,* under the Title of *the Immaculate Conception, Patroness of Ireland.* It also decreed that the Feast of the Immaculate Conception should be observed in Ireland as a holiday of obligation to the end of time. This is noteworthy, as the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not proclaimed until 1854, two hundred years afterwards.

New hopes now that Clanricard was Lord Deputy, were raised, that the common danger, Cromwell, would compel the conflicting parties to unite for their common safety. There was great rejoicing in Loughrea on the Feast of the Purification, in 1651, when the earl in vice-

St Mary's, Aille

St Dympna's, Kilnadeema

Convent of Mercy, St Raphael's, Loughrea

regal state attended Solemn Mass in the Carmelite Church of the Blessed Virgin. The Sword of State was borne before him and the chief military officers accompanied him. John de Burgo presided in choir and with him were the bishops of Clonfert (Walter Lynch) of Kilmacduagh, Limerick, Killala, Emily, Down and Kilfenora, while the chief notables of the realm were in the church. All these assembled in the vain hope of getting the Earl to join the Confederation and bring his army with him. All efforts failed. The Confederation dissolved and later in the same year the victorious Cromwellian army entered Connacht.

Recent attempts made by some historians to rehabilitate Cromwell's reputation do not change the fact that the country was laid waste.

Galway was besieged and was surrendered by Clanricard on May 12th, 1652, to Ludlow, the Commander- in- Chief of the Cromwellian army. Two thousand of its inhabitants were transported as slaves to the West Indies. John De Burgo and Walter Lynch were in Galway when it was besieged, but both managed to escape to the Continent. Many years afterwards John returned to Galway in 1662. Earlier doubts that he had expressed about Ormond, who was again Vice Roy were vindicated when Ormond threw some of his bishops into prison. John died on Holy Thursday 1667 at the venerable age of 77.

Bishop Lynch and Gyor

Walter Lynch, as has been said, succeeded John de Burgo in the see of Clonfert. He was educated in Caen and Lisbon and was Warden of Galway before he came to Clonfert in 1647. When Galway capitulated to Cromwell's forces, he escaped to Inisboffin and sailed a short time later to the continent. He went first to Brussels, but later to Hungary, where he became Canon to the Cathedral and assistant bishop of Györ from 1655 to 1663. He continued to guide Clonfert from his place of exile, occasionally sending some pastoral letters to his flock. Due to problems with the governance of his diocese, Lynch was determined to come home, but died suddenly in 1663.

Walter Lynch is remembered on the continent on account of his association with a miraculous picture of the Madonna and child, which he brought with him to Györ. On St. Patrick's Day, 1697 a bloody sweat was noted on the face of the Blessed Virgin. It was wiped with linen cloths and the blood soaked into the cloths which have been preserved to this day. Each year on March 17th in Györ this miraculous event is commemorated. The original painting hangs over the altar of the Blessed Virgin and nearby is buried the remains of Bishop Lynch. Local diocesan interest in Clonfert's unique link with Hungary was revived when Monsignor Louis Page (1908-1999) highlighted the Bishop Lynch story in an article in the diocesan college's magazine *Gearrbhaile* in 1954.

Promoted to the pastorship of Fahy and Quansboro in 1963, Monsignor Page set about building a new parish church and dedicated it to *Our Lady, Consoler of the Afflicted,* or *Our Lady of Györ.* In 1985, as Vicar-General of Clonfert, he visited Györ with Bishop Joseph Cassidy and a small deputation from the diocese. On Sunday 10th October 2003, the bishop of Györ Most Rev. Lajos Papai, and a delegation from his diocese presented a beautiful hand-painted copy of the original painting to St. Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea. This coincided with the release of a documentary for Hungarian television on the miraculous happenings in Györ. Clonfert rejoices in its link with the Hungarian

Painting of our Lady, Consoler of the Afflicted in St Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea

Church, forged in difficult times for the faith at home. This bond remains as strong as ever. The Administrator of St. Brendan's Cathedral, Very Rev. Cathal Geraghty attended mass in Györ Cathedral on St. Patrick's Day 2005. On this occasion a plaque made of Connemara marble was unveiled in honour of Bishop Walter Lynch, by Minister of State Noel Ahern and by the Irish Ambassador to Hungary, His Excellency Brendan McMahon.

Dangerous Times

St Joseph & The Child Jesus, from a painting in Ss Peter & Paul, Kiltulla

Following the Cromwellian wars, desolation, famine and misery stalked the land. Wolves roved the wilds of Connacht and a priest, we are told, hiding in a soutterain in Woodford, was torn asunder by a pack of them. In 1656 a Jesuit writes from Ireland to his General in Rome *the province of Connacht is a scene of desolation and has been reduced to a desert by the ravages of war. There remain but two towns, Galway and Loughrea and both of them have been handed over to the Anabaptists.* Indeed, within eight years, between 1644 and 1652, the population of Ireland had fallen from 1,466,000 to 850,000.

Catholics and Protestants, Irish and Anglo-Irish suffered by the transplantation, which followed. Portions of each barony in Clonfert were set-aside for transplanted persons. William Spenser, a descendant of the poet Edmund Spenser was granted Ballinasloe, but before many years it passed by sale to Frederick Trench. The Esmondes were transplanted to Eyrecourt and sold out to the Eyres. The Aylewards with eighty other families came from Waterford and settled near Woodford, while the le Poers were given a large estate about Loughrea, which afterwards passed by intermarriage to the Trenches. Henry Cromwell, brother of Oliver, secured Clanricard's seat with a large estate near Portumna, but lost it at the restoration.

In the succeeding reign of Charles II, Clonfert became safer for the practice of the Catholic religion than most other parts of the country. From the *Registration of Parish priests* in 1704, it appears that the Bishops, Teige Keogh and his successor Muirceartach Donnellan had ordained at least 144 priests from almost every county in Ireland, in secluded places in the diocese between 1671 and 1701. A plaque recording a number of these men's names hangs in the porch of the Church of the Assumption in Killoran. It was at Ballylogue in the present parish of Mullagh and Killoran that the Bishops carried out these ceremonies at a spot now known locally as *Cathaoir An Easpaig* or the *Bishop's Chair,* hidden away in the furze bushes on a piece of marshy ground. This spot was until 1976 just a mound of peat when a local man, Johnny Hardiman, at the prompting of Fr. Peter Dunne C.C. erected there an altar and Bishops' throne, both of stone. Later on May 16th of that year, the Feast of St. Brendan, the Bishop of Clonfert, Dr. Thomas Ryan confirmed 53 children from the parish. On that occasion, still vividly recalled by the people of Killoran, Bishop Ryan said: *Other dioceses in Ireland owe a debt of gratitude to this hallowed spot for the priests ordained here to serve their areas. One can see a link with the great St. Brendan of a thousand years earlier, whose feast occurs today, who sent monks out from his monastery in Clonfert to establish monastic foundations elsewhere in Ireland, in Britain and on the continent of Europe.*

Aerial view. The Bishop's chair Killoran

He also paid tribute to the fortitude of his predecessors, Bishops Keogh and Donnellan.

After the death of Walter Lynch, the see remained vacant for fifteen years until the appointment of Teige Keogh in 1678. A native of the parish of Taughmaconnell, he returned to live there with his family, having been consecrated bishop by no less a man than St. Oliver Plunkett. Local tradition held that he had a school here for aspirants to the priesthood who were disguised as workmen. Keogh died in 1687 and was interred at Kilcorban. Clonfert returned to the governance of Vicars until 1695 when Muirceartach Donnellan was appointed.

With the Treaty of Limerick in 1691 came a new phase of the Penal Laws when no Catholic might acquire land or even lease land and no priest might freely exercise his ministry. Bishops and other church dignitaries, monks and friars were banished under pain of death. Parish priests were registered in 1704 with a view to establishing their new identity so that as they died out they might not be replaced. This register has now a historical value it was not then intended to have. From it we can glean that in this darkest of periods there were thirty-two parish clergy in Clonfert, a large number in proportion to the population of the time, than the present numbers. In addition there were many more priests in hiding or living as chaplains to the catholic gentry.

Ss Peter & Paul, Kiltulla

St Mary's, Clooncah

Bishop Donnellan was to elude the authorities for many years. A graduate of Alcala University, he was seized at last in 1703, but on the way to Galway Jail, was rescued from his captors by a large force of people, numbering about 300, on horseback and foot and well-armed. Such was the spirit of the Clonfert's laity in the face of the law. Bishop Donnellan was almost seventy at the time and three years later he died unapprehended.

St Iomar's, Killimordaly

Ambrose Madden, parish priest of Loughrea, who was secretly Bishop elect of Killala, was charged at the Galway Assizes in 1699 with exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction, but seems to have evaded the authorities. In 1713 he was Bishop of Clonfert. The previous year he had been committed to Galway Jail by David Power of Coorheen, son of a Cromwellian transplanter and then High Sheriff of the County, but he would appear to have again escaped the net.

Power complained that, were it not for the protection of troops of dragoons in Loughrea, his life would be in danger from the people who turned out in their hundreds in support of Dr. Madden. This incident is, in local lore, associated with the death of Power's only son and the extinction of his name. His daughter Frances married Frederick Trench of Garbally in 1732 and with her the Power estates passed to the Clancarty family.

Ambrose Madden was succeeded by Bishop Edmund Kelly (1718-1733). Something of his career may be gleaned from the inscription on his tombstone in Clonkeen cemetery, near Tiaquin, Co. Galway. It reads: *Here Lyeth Ye RT. Rd. Far. in God Edmond Kelly Doctor of Sorbonne formerly Dean And Vicar General of ye diocess First Almener to ye Gld Ellecter of Triers Envoy to ye Court of Vienna and Late Lord Bishop of Clonfert.* Evidently, a man well versed in the art of diplomacy, the only pastoral surviving from those times comes from his hand in 1725. Only one copy was made, apparently, to be passed from one parish priest to another. Even so, it fell into the hands of a government spy and found its way to the Public Records office. In the course of this letter Dr. Kelly, exhorts both his clergy and his flock to *repent from our hearts for our past iniquities and to fast, pray and share our substance with the distressed, everyone according to his ability.*

At this time the Catholic landowners managed to retain possession of their lands, often through the good offices of their Protestant neighbours, who normally held the land for them. Sometimes too, Catholic landowners made pretence of conforming to the state religion for this purpose and there were cases in the diocese where these same landowners let to the friars some of the land and the monastic sites which had been confiscated from them a century before. All this helped to undo the Penal Code. A very clear indication of its failure to crush Catholic religion and education in Clonfert diocese is given in a report made in 1730 by Strafford Eyre, Governor of Galway, to Archbishop Boulter who was trying to revive the persecution. Dealing with the friaries within the diocese he says:

The friars of Meelick hold their farm of Darcy Hamilton, a Popish lawyer, who leases it from Colonel Eyre. There is a very large spacious house and vaults lately built and not yet quite finished at this abbey... The friars of Portumna live two miles from the Abbey, at Boula, which they rent from Redmond Dolphin, a convert to Protestantism. The friars of Abbey removed from Tomany to a house adjoining the abbey in 1730. Denis Daly of Raford, a convert to Protestantism, set them the house and eight acres of land. A very large chapel well slated was lately finished there. Denis Daly's brother-in-law, a Papist rents a house to the friars in Loughrea (these were the Carmelites) *The friars from Athenry* (Dominicans) *live at Esker. Kilconnell friars live at the Abbey on the Estate of Anthony Daly, a convert to Protestantism, and those of Attycoffee, now Clontuskert live on the estate of one Archdekane, a Papist.*

He gives the name of forty families, and he says there are forty mass houses, thirty-eight priests and there is commonly a Popish school in every parish. He mentions two Popish schools in Clontuskert, three in Taughmaconnell in 1727 and three in Kilclooney in 1729. He also mentions communities of nuns at Loughrea and elsewhere, living quietly in private houses and says that every Catholic family of any consequence had a private oratory and chaplain.

After this time the government gradually relaxed the active persecution, but the penal laws were still on the statute books and the political and economic disabilities remained. Thus, from 1740 until Emancipation in 1829, the church in Clonfert came further and further into the light of day, but the churches were poor and wretched structures and parochial houses for the clergy non-existent. Often they lived in lodgings, sometimes in the home of the local Catholic landlord, or even away from their parishes in the nearest town. In station seasons they did not return home at all, but went from village to village, staying in the houses where the stations were held. It was a century of peace, removed from the bad old days, and the population began to increase. The Eyres and Trenches were the undisputed local authorities, holding the leading political and military positions.

The Earl of Clanricard had lost his political influence after the Williamite war, but was nevertheless the largest landowner in the diocese. This, the main branch of the De Burgos had over a century previously become thoroughly anglicised, but had remained Catholic. The heir apparent to the title, Lord Bophin, had the misfortune to be captured at Aughrim and missed the benefit of the Treaty of Limerick. He forfeited by attainer and recovered his property only by handing over his eldest sons to Protestant relatives to be reared as Protestants.

Earl John, himself, did not conform. There was a grand-jury presentment to the effect that his son Ulick was sent to France to be educated in 1713. This son with another son, William served in the army of France, while a third son was colonel of an Irish regiment in the Spanish service. So it would seem that the eldest son, the heir to the title and estates was actually brought up a Protestant, and thereafter the Clanricard line remained as such.

With the death of Dr. Kelly in August 1733, Peter Donnellan became Bishop of Clonfert. His episcopate is the longest in the history of the diocese, lasting forty-five years. By 1767 he was 82 years old and in need of a coadjutor. Nine canons of the diocesan chapter formally requested the Holy Father to appoint one. The candidate they had in mind was Martin French, a Dominican, who for various reasons Donnellan considered unacceptable. Also vying for the post, was his own brother Andrew Donnellan who was Dean of Clonfert and Vicar General, but who was at this time in his mid-seventies.

St Mary's, Lawrencetown

St Patrick's, Kiltormer

The postulation of French caused such conflict between Donnellan and his canons that he even threatened to remove them from their parishes. In the end, however, in November 1776, his coadjutor was chosen. It was to be his brother Andrew who by now was 83 years old. He took over the spiritual leadership of the see on Peter's death in 1778, but by 1786 old age had caught up on him and he requested John Dolphin O.P. as coadjutor. Instead, he was given a diocesan priest, Fr. Thomas Costello and the first bishop of the diocese for years that did not come from a local aristocratic family.

Bishop Costello

St Andrew's, Leitrim

Nativity scene - St Michael's, Ballinasloe

Bishop Costello who was in his early forties had been a priest of the diocese of Achonry. He was related on his mother's side to both the Bishops of Elphin and Achonry and had risen to the rank of Vicar-General within his own diocese. His accession to the diocese, however, was not a smooth one. Apart from the aged Donnellan's protestations, there were attempts made to block his appointment by one Valentine Bodkin.

Bodkin, later Warden of Galway (1805-12) had been a college contemporary of Costello's and in a lengthy letter to the Cardinal Administrators of Propaganda disputes his nomination on his alleged lack of intellect and ability. He even draws attention to the fact that Costello's father was a publican selling whiskey in his abode beside the Kings's highway! Bodkin's remonstrances, however, may be taken lightly as he himself had been accused of various misdemeanours while in college and was frequently canvassing for a bishopric of his own.

Costello finally succeeded to the bishopric in 1787, but one final incident shows how tenaciously the Clanricard's held on to their ancient prerogatives. When Dr. Costello proceeded to take possession of the mensal parish of Loughrea, he was confronted by the Clanricard house, in the person of a Catholic representative, Lady Letitia Moore who lived at Mount Pleasant. She claimed their ancient right to present to the parish of Loughrea. There was some litigation in Rome, the outcome of which is not certain, but Dr. Costello went to reside in Ballinasloe and the Clanricard presentee, Fr. Myles Burke retained the parish of Loughrea. She later presented the parish to Dr. Costello's successor, Dr. Coen. That, however, was the last that was heard of the Clanricard presentation to Loughrea.

Sometime after, in 1816, the Countess of Clanricard, the Catholic daughter of Sir. Thomas Burke of Marblehill, was sueing in the Civil courts on behalf of the Earl, who was a minor, for the Protestant rectories of Killuan, Clonkeen, Kilconnell, Killane and Fohenagh and the right of presentation to their respective vicarages, but this time the suit failed. In 1807, we find Fr. Myles Burke sending an annuity of £10 to Dr. Costello indicating that some agreement had been reached.

A view of the diocese of Clonfert during the early years of Dr. Costello's episcopate may be gleaned from the *Relatio Status Ecclesia in Hibernica* which he submitted to Propaganda in 1797. Costello speaks very highly of the regular clergy, singling out the Dominicans for particular praise as he says: *if I happen to send any of my clergy there for spiritual renewal, the good Fathers' work so zealously at providing spiritual counsel that the clergy are always much improved as a result.* Among the points he mentions are that there is a Christian Doctrine Society active in the diocese. Indeed, during Dr. Costello's episcopate the church

Calvary Scene, St Michael's, Ballinasloe

St Jarlath's, Ballyduggan

in Clonfert began to stand more and more on its own two feet again. The earliest parochial registers extant were begun in his time and an inscription on a silver plated candlestick in the possession of the late Fr. Martin Leahy PP, Eyrecourt, shows that there was at the time a Confraternity in Ballinasloe. In 1807 an account of the diocese was submitted to the English government signed by Edward Dillon, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Tuam. In it Dr. Dillon complains that the Bishop of Clonfert is not well paid, having received only £116-16-6 in the course of the year. Twenty-four parishes are listed in the report (which coincides with the present number) and there are twenty regular clergy in the diocese, none of them working in parishes.

Schools in Clonfert were numerous in Dr. Costello's time - in some parishes more numerous than they are today – as can be seen in the lists of diocesan schools published by a commission of 1826.

Just before 1800, the Carmelite nuns in Loughrea were running a school for poor children and by 1818, there were two public charity schools there under the direction of Bishop Thomas Coen. He had been appointed in 1816, with right of succession to Bishop Costello who succumbed to old age on the 8th October 1831, and is buried in Creagh cemetery, Ballinasloe.

Bishop Coen

Our Lady of the Assumption, Killoran

Bishop Coen, who was a native of the parish of Fohenagh, came from a relatively comfortable background. His father had been chief farm steward and gamekeeper to Lord Clonbrock, the area of the demesne in which they lived later acquiring the name, *"Coen's Park"* Thomas Coen had the singular honour of being the first student in the country to matriculate into St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, the first past student to become an officer of the college and the first graduate to become an Irish Bishop.

The public highlight of Thomas Coen's episcopate was his role in fighting proselytism within his diocese, wherein, it had found a staunch proponent in the person of Archdeacon Charles Trench. Charles Le Poer Trench (1773-1839) was the son of Baron Kilconnell of Garbally and his mother Anne was the sister of the first Lord Mountjoy. His family were the dominant landed interest in Ballinasloe. Trench, it appears, had been on good terms with the local Catholic clergy up to 1818. Archdeacon Trench had even been prevailed upon by the Parish Priest of Taughmaconnell to preach against the activities of the Ribbonmen. It is uncertain as to when the first of the Trench family's estate schools was established, but by 1824 four of these schools were operating in Ballinasloe. Trench had entered into an agreement, in 1818, with the local P.P., Archdeacon Garrett Lorcan, to educate both Catholic and Protestant children together without distinction of religion and on condition that no book was used of bias to either creed. Lorcan later discovered that Trench had introduced a book of his own composition. After an altercation between both, the Catholic parents withdrew their children. Trench posted a notice in his own handwriting stating that all tenants over whom he had control could expect no favour if they withheld their children from his school. Indeed he carried out his threat with a ruthless zeal, evicting tenants and levelling their modest homes.

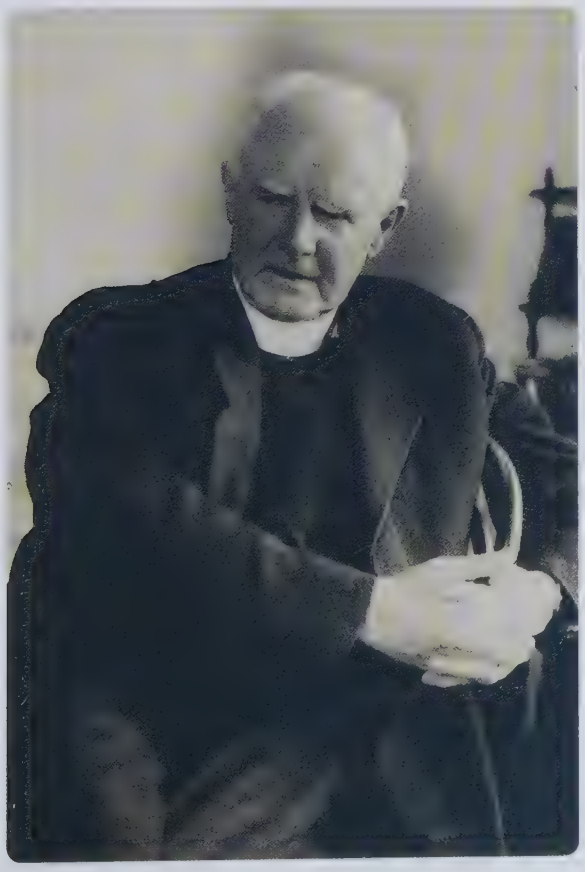
In 1821 an estate school, situated near the gate of the present episcopal residence, was established on the Earl of Clancarty's property in the parish of Kilnadeema, in the western end of the diocese. The tenants now found themselves choosing between eviction and excommunication. Most of them chose the latter and as a consequence Bishop Coen placed Kilnadeema under interdict. The interdict was only lifted after the Bible schools Controversy had run its course, culminating in a law trial. With the death of Bishop Costello, Dr. Coen now found himself chiefly responsible for the one hundred and eighteen thousand Catholics living in his diocese.

Dr. Coen's episcopate saw an increase of pastoral activity in the diocese. In 1832 Lord Clanricard granted a schoolhouse for Loughrea and the following year a plot of land in Loughrea parish was granted to the Trustees of the Commissioners of Education by two ladies – Miss Mary Dolphin and Miss Jane Reddington. In 1844, a National school was established in Esker and eleven years previously, a National school had been opened in Ballinasloe, replacing the nine Catholic pay schools in operation there.

In 1842 a particularly positive account is given of education in the diocese. The *Irish Catholic Directory* tells us that *Real practical religious education is much promoted.* In the same source there is the first recorded reference to a college in Loughrea. An academy had been *established by the venerable Prelate for the education of ecclesiastical students preparatory to their entrance into college.* The primary source of funding for this was the contributions of Dr. Coen and his clergy. Indeed by this year, there were over ten students in Maynooth studying for the diocese. There were also a number of catechetical societies active, no doubt to counteract the estate schools still active in some parts of the diocese. In 1840 Dr. Coen welcomed Fr. Theobald Mathew, the Apostle of Temperance to Loughrea, where he conducted a two-day mission and reportedly administered the pledge to eighty thousand people.

The diocese had become *well regulated* with ten conferences annually for its forty-one priests in 1844, with a triennial visitation of the diocese by the bishop for the administration of confirmation. Coen also established the *Purgatorial Society* to ensure that *all abuses hitherto practiced at wakes are abolished.*

An t-Athair Eric McFhinn



St Killian's, New Inn

St Patrick's, Bullaun

St Brendan's Mullagh

famine in Clonfert

Photograph taken c. 1864, with Bishop Derry and Clergy at Carmelite Abbey, Loughrea

By early October1845, reports were circulating that potato disease had appeared in pockets of Munster and Ulster. Within a couple of weeks it had reached Galway. Bishop Coen had seen famine in his diocese before. The years 1816 - 1818 had witnessed a failure of harvest and the potato crop compounded by economic recession. In this time also, there seemed to be a rise in vagrancy. In 1844 a visitor to Ireland was appalled by the scale of poverty and said:

They are like Pharaoh's frogs. They compass the whole length and breath of the land and are almost as much to be dreaded as his ten whole plagues...the ill-fated stranger needs a fathomless bag, who ventures among the hungry-armed assailants.

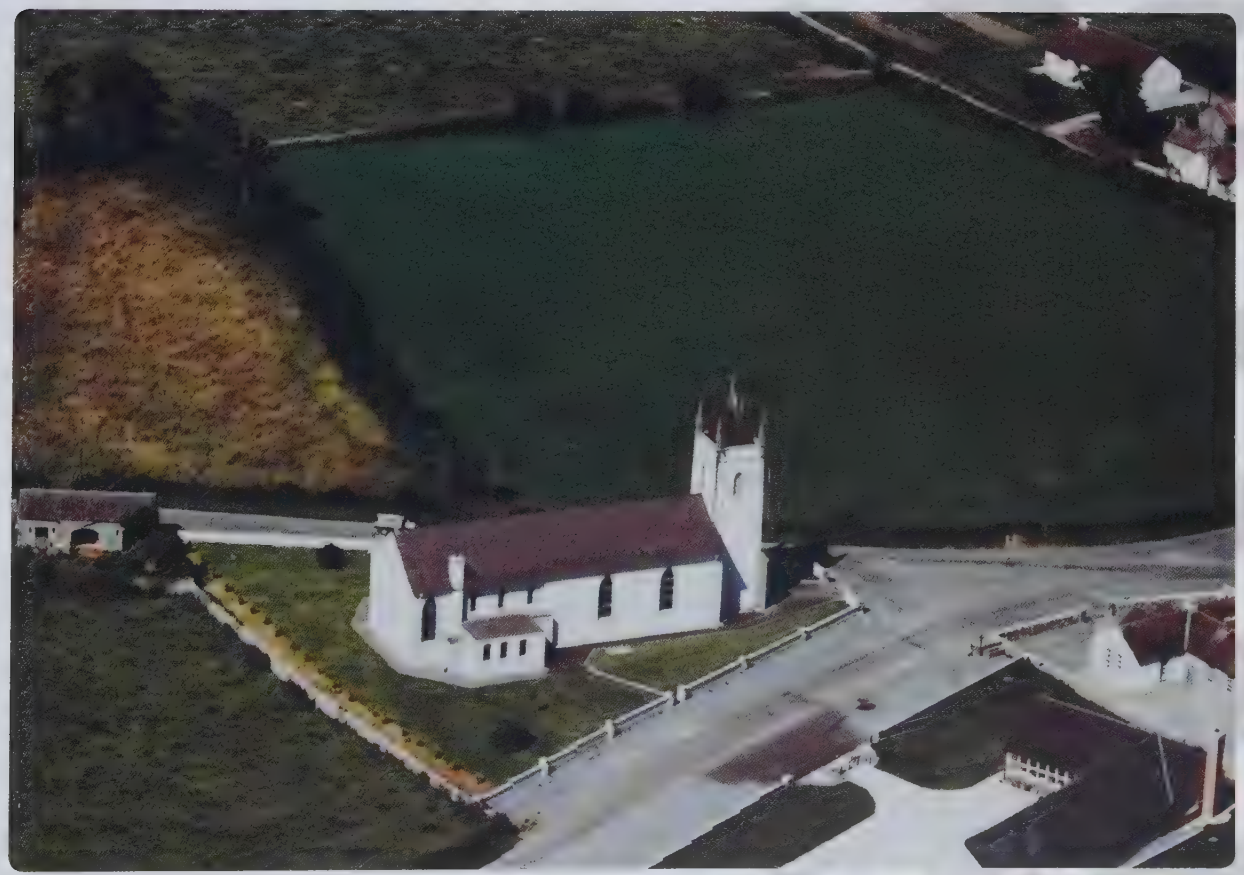
1822 –1823, 1825-1826 and more recently 1830-1832 had also witnessed poor potato crops, and Dr. Coen's diocese, being among the most rural in Ireland, was badly hit. In 1846 Ballinasloe's potato crop was a complete failure. By May 1848 there were one thousand four hundred people crowded into Ballinasloe workhouse. Indeed they were the lucky ones.

By now in his late seventies, Bishop Coen could only look on helplessly as many of his flock and indeed some of his priests fell victim to the effects of the famine. It was not for long, however, as he became seriously ill with dysentery on 15th April, 1847, at the Annual General Meeting of his clergy. Ten days later he was dead.

Sacred Heart, Killeen

St Lawrence's, Tynagh

St Cronan's, Lusmagh



Bishop Derry

Bishop John Derry

Dr. Coen's successor was the Dean of the diocese John Derry. He shared some of his predecessor's experiences, having been junior dean in Maynooth (1833-1837), and also in his conflict with the Trench family over the question of the estate schools while Parish Priest of Ballymacward. Derry, however, was a progressive, energetic man and not to be cowed easily. In 1858 he was to place Limehill in Duniry parish under interdict when its people refused to become part of the parish of Leitrim. The bishop lost this fight, however, as they stood their ground against him. Under his guidance, church building in the diocese flourished. Most of the best churches of the present day including Ballymacward, Taughmaconnell, Ballinakill, Lusmagh, Eyrecourt and St. Michael's in Ballinasloe were built in his time.

The story of the building of St. Michael's is a particularly stirring one. Standing on the eastern end of the town of Ballinasloe on the bank of the river Suck, it was built from designs by Mr.McCarthy, the plans later being revised by the celebrated Augustus Welby Pugin. Begun in 1852, not long after the ferocity of the great famine, it took six years to complete. Sadly, the man who helped initiate the process, Archdeacon Dillon .P.P did not live to see its completion, but in a moving story had an awning erected over the sanctuary area before his death in late June 1856, to celebrate mass there. He deserves special recognition, having given thirty-seven years service to the parish of Ballinasloe. With his death, the Chapter of Canons in Clonfert died out and Ballinasloe became a mensal parish. For the solemn consecration of the church, Bishop Derry invited Nicholas Cardinal Wiseman to preach on the occasion. The head of the newly restored English Catholic hierarchy, Wiseman received a tumultuous reception in Ballinasloe. Vast crowds assembled numbering, it is said, almost twenty five thousand. When the Cardinal's train arrived in Ballinasloe he was taken by carriage to the Church, but half way the horses were removed and the carriage was drawn in triumph by prominent townspeople through the streets. At various points were hung large poles with floated banners and ribbons. That night virtually all the houses in the town were lit up while Chinese lamps adorned the streets. Such was the spirit of the people of Ballinasloe in the wake of adversity.

Bishop Derry also established the Sisters of Mercy in the diocese, first in Loughrea in October 1851 and then in Ballinasloe in March 1853. Since that time the Sisters of Mercy have made an outstanding contribution to the diocese. From 1854 to 1863 Lord Clancarty obstructed the nuns

Ss Peter & Paul, Boula

from visiting the workhouse in Ballinasloe, but after this time the Board of Guardians gave way and the nuns visited twice weekly, giving religious instruction on Sundays. An Industrial School was begun in 1887, which continued until 1967 and in 1873, they opened a National School. In 1919 the Sisters opened a secondary school, which stood for many years on Society Street in Ballinasloe. Scoil Mhuire is located since 2003 at Mackney, on the road from Ballinasloe to Aughrim. Today the sisters are still involved in all aspects of pastoral life in the diocese, continuing to make a rich contribution to the lives of its people.

While returning from the First Vatican Council and after a bout of ill-health, Bishop Derry died at the home of a sister in Brideswell on June 28th 1870. He lies interred in the community cemetery of the Sisters of Mercy in Loughrea.

Church of the Ascension, Gortanumera

St Brigid's, Portumna

Bishop Patrick Duggan

Eviction Scene

Fr. Hugh O'Rourke, a priest of the Archdiocese of Tuam who was professor of English and French in Maynooth, was appointed Bishop of Clonfert on 12th February 1871. Though only in his early thirties, O'Rourke suffered from delicate health and declined, returning the Bulls to Rome. In his autobiographical *Reminiscences of a Maynooth Professor,* Walter MacDonald has fond memories of him... *a better-mannered, more agreeable colleague one could not have. He was the only man I knew in my time to refuse a bishopric... He actually received the brief from propaganda appointing him to the see of Clonfert.* His refusal was accepted, and September of the same year saw the appointment of Patrick Duggan. Duggan was regarded as a man of the people coming from farming stock in the parish of Cummer, near Tuam. In his late fifties, he had seen in his younger days as a priest the dreadful effects of the famine on his flock, something that, it is said, remained with him for the rest of his life. He was consecrated Bishop of Clonfert in the convent chapel of the Sisters of Mercy in Loughrea on the feast of the Holy Name, January 11th 1872 by Dr. MacEvilly, Bishop of Galway. Bishop Duggan is remembered chiefly for the warmth of his patriotism.

The memory of the great famine, as has been said, burned deeply into his soul and when he became bishop he took an uncompromising stand on the side of the downtrodden tenant. In 1873, with many of his leading priests, he was tried before the Court of the Queens Bench in Dublin for undue influence on the Nolan and Trench elections, but was acquitted. With the advent of the Land League he gave the movement his whole-hearted support and it is largely through his share in that fight that it was so successful and that the people gained undisputed possession of their land. He also procured the site for the new cathedral, and started a fund for its erection. By 1884, however, he was feeling the weight of years and ill health and requested a coadjutor. His own personal choice was

that of Fr. Patrick Costello, a native of the parish of Leitrim and at that time the Administrator of the parish of Ballinasloe. Costello was an austere but energetic man who would complete the work of building a spire on to St. Michael's Church, but instead Dr. John Healy was appointed. Dr. Healy was a priest of the diocese of Elphin, a great scholar of Irish ecclesiastical history and had been on the staff of St., Patrtick's College, Maynooth, since 1879. Conservative in his politics and described by the late Dr.P.K.Egan as a *convinced unionist* he took over the general administration of the diocese in 1891 when Dr. Duggan retired from active work. Long before he came to Clonfert, Dr. Healy was not shy in making his feelings known, as Walter MacDonald was later to relate. Dr. Healy he says...

Not only applauded the denunciations of the Whigs, but very often set on these gentlemen, by his own flings at the agents and the methods of the Land League... As a Conservative, he was out of place. He should have been a Mob Orator, and he seemed to know it.

When Dr. Duggan died suddenly in Dublin in 1896 following a stroke, he succeeded to the Bishopric.

Bishop Patrick Duggan

Photograph taken at the Carmelite Abbey c. 1881/2.
Priests in tonsure dress left to right: Rev.s John Cunningham, John Sellars (the Younger), Mgr James Madden, Fr Patrick Egan

Bishop Healy

St John the Baptist, Woodford

Bishop Healy had much to occupy his mind during his time in Clonfert, not least of which was the Land Campaign. He did not share the same patriotic fervour of his predecessor and some came to regard him as *a castle bishop*. Rarely, in fact was the bishop known to countenance opposition to his own views. On one occasion there was an attempt on his life. While staying with the P.P. of Mullagh and Killoran, Fr. Joseph Bodkin, Dr. Healy was readying himself for bed when a shot was fired through the window. The mark made by the bullet is still to be seen in the old parochial house today. The Land War may arguably be said to have reached its climax with the *Siege of Saunders Fort* in August 1886. The Marquis of Clanricard known as *the miser earl* used the forces of the Crown to evict many of his tenants for refusing to pay their rents. On Friday, August 20th, the house of Thomas Saunders in the parish of Woodford was besieged by the authorities, but its twenty-two occupants held out, by throwing bee-hives, limewater, stones and other missiles at the cowering assailants. They managed to hold out for a full week when on Friday August 27th, some two hundred soldiers backed up by several hundred police stormed the house and overcame its occupants. Hundreds of locals gathered to watch and cheer on the besieged occupants, but were kept in line by the local P.P. Fr. Patrick Coen and his curate Fr. Patrick Egan.

In December 1886, Bishop Healy was writing to the Prefect of the Propaganda to say, *That nefarious system, the Boycott- a social excommunication which disregards all justice and*

charity, almost everywhere obtains, especially in the South and West, and terrifies everybody, even the bishops themselves and the priests, who hardly venture to absent themselves from the meetings of the National League.

Indeed, Clanricard's agent Blake had not only been shot dead, but his remains were unlawfully exhumed and his grave desecrated. Such were the times. Dr. Healy wrote twice to the Earl at the request of his tenants, but there was no reply to either letter. The Earl of Clanricard died in April of 1916 leaving a vast fortune. Only the year before, however, the Congested Districts Board, who acquired all his land through their powers of compulsory land acquisition, defeated him. Though he had fought them bitterly through the courts, the ruling went in their favour, and with his death ended the direct line of the Clanricard dynasty and their ancient prerogative over Irish land.

Mount Bernard, Ballymacward, Residence of Dr. Healy

Bishop John Healy

St Brendan's, Looscaun

The advent of the Diocesa College in Clonfert

1895 – taken at Diocesan College Esker- several of these students became priests. first line: Rev. j. P. Callanan (President), j. McDonagh, (Bishop) j. Dignan, (Fr) j. Madden, t. Royston, G. Madden, Rev. B. Bowes. second line: j. Neylon, (Fr) t. Melvin, B. Fahy, (Fr) t. Dunne, L. Morgan, j. Tierney, t. Conroy, M. Tuohy. third line: (Fr) j. K. O'Neill, j. Tuohy, (Fr) t. O'Connor, (Fr) t. Porter, j. Corcoran, j. Clery, (Fr) P. Mulkerrins, (Fr) j. Heagney, j. Dempsey. fourth line: j. Lyons, (Fr) A. Flynn, (Fr) H. Brennan, Prof. McGennis, (Fr) M. Donoghue, P. Lyne, P. McKeowan

Given his own distinguished academic career, Dr. Healy naturally made the provision of a diocesan college one of his priorities. It was for this and for the building of St. Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea, that he is chiefly remembered.

Indeed, the idea of a diocesan college or minor seminary had occupied the minds of some of his predecessors. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, when the Penal Laws were partially relaxed, Catholic teachers could follow their profession, but only under licence from the local Protestant Bishop. In his periodical report to Rome, on the condition of his diocese, Bishop Thomas Costello could only bewail the fact that it was impossible for him to establish a minor seminary there. As he had lived well into the eighteenth century when he could do so without fear, financial considerations must have been a part of the problem.

Bishop Coen, his successor, had as we have read an academy in Loughrea in 1842; however, given that during the period 1841- 1851 Loughrea shrank in population from 7,152 to 4,459 and that Coen himself died only five years after it was opened, it did not survive very long. In any event, after 1842, we hear no more of it. Any hope there was came from the Dominicans. In the nineteenth century, from 1836 or so, a remarkable series of schools were operating in Esker: a school of six hundred children of whom fifty were fed, a private school and a school where trades were taught. These were at primary level and the driving force behind the effort was Fr. Peter Smith, Prior of Esker and one time Provincial of the Order. More ambitiously, he established St.Dominic's College on August 4th 1847, to provide higher education for better-off Catholics with a curriculum that included a literary and classical course, and a science course with a bias towards agriculture. It was, however, a masterpiece

of bad timing. Lasting only ten years, it was undone by a number of factors, namely famine conditions, the remote location and the poor quality of the farm soil. It also left a staggering debt of £16.000.00. At its zenith, however, it had fifty-three boarders and nine-day pupils. The boarding fee was £25.00 per annum. Despite this failure the friars did not abandon Esker until 1893 and the premises were later to become part of the Diocesan College's story once again. Bishop Derry had also made an attempt, where his predecessors had failed and on May 12th 1852, the Galway Vindicator reported:

Hitherto the important town of Loughrea has been woefully deficient in facilities for giving a sound scientific and mercantile education to the youth of the middle class... We are glad, however, to perceive that Right Rev. Dr. Derry is taking active steps supply the want which has so long existed...

The house supplied for this project was the gift of Lord Clanricard whose mother was the Catholic daughter of Sir Thomas Burke of Marblehill, and who had, during her lifetime headed the committee, which provided financial support for the Catholic primary schools in Loughrea, established by Bishop Coen. Its location describes the large dwelling of *Rus-In-Urbe* at the east end of Loughrea and beside Garrybreeda Cemetery. It would remain St. Brendan's seminary until 1903 when it closed.

Mgr James Madden, College Benefactor

St Ronan's Church, Taghmaconnel

The priests who taught in St. Brendan's also worked in the parish and from 1863 - 1880 the parish administrators were also presidents of the college. One of these was Fr. Michael Mullins, a noted poet. His best-known piece, *The Celtic Tongue* was published in *The Nation* in August 1854 and is a passionate lament for the disappearing language. Fr. Mullins' health broke down in 1865 and he had to leave for the drier climate of Chicago where he died in 1869 at the age of thirty-six. Another priest of that period, Fr. James Madden, deserves special mention, not only because he preserved the solitary list of students which has survived from that time, but because it was through his generosity towards the end of his life that it became possible to establish a viable residential seminary. Of the thirty-seven names on Fr. Madden's list in March 1858, many went on to Maynooth, though only five were ordained. Life here was obviously pleasant enough to evoke the halcyon memories expressed by James Ridge, a past student, over twenty years later in the *Loughrea Journal* of January 1880:

Neath thy roof, dear Rusinurbe, Peace and plenty on me smiled.
And mingled pain and pleasure fond remembrance oft recalls.
The happy years I spent in boyhood
In St. Brendan's College halls
Pleasure at the thought of studies
My kind masters made so sweet,
Pain to think that my old schoolmates
In this world I ne'er may meet
Walsh, McDermott, Moran, Airly,
Should you see this verse of mine,
Let your hearts, to mine responsive
Thrill with thoughts of Auld Land Syne.

Carrarea House

Meanwhile, Bishop Duggan had in 1872 established a classical school in two adjoining houses, at Bridge Street, Ballinasloe and called it St.Michael's. He placed in charge of it Rev. John R. Moloney, a particularly brilliant young priest of the diocese who was a native of Killimor. He was president until 1887 when he died a young man after a long battle with cancer. This school had small numbers, due to the existence already of two other schools in the town, one of which was Breaky's Academy, which catered for Catholic and Protestant alike. Yet it had a large measure of success and lasted until 1902.

After 1880 the Bishop decided to enlarge St. Brendan's in Loughrea and set up a committee in November of 1882 to report on the finances of the project. This committee consisted of four parish priests and the bishop and carried over to the residential seminary, St. Joseph's College, but now is known as the Governing Body. In the century 1795-1895, one hundred and eighty three students from Clonfert attended Maynooth College, not all of them, of course, persevering to the priesthood. Most matriculated into Humanity, the lowest class, but between 1875 – 1895, twelve of those who went on from St. Brendan's matriculated into Philosophy, indicating an improvement in teaching standards in the school. The three matriculations at that time were directly due to Dr.Duggan's tuition in philosophy. Bishop Healy, however, made the question of providing a resident seminary more acute. In time the problem was to unravel by itself.

St Joseph's College, Garbally Park

Madden Generosity

Fr John Madden, Nephew of Mgr James

Monsignor James Madden, now Vicar - General of the Diocese and P.P. of Tynagh had two bachelor brothers, John Joe and Stephen, living together on a farm of one hundred and thirteen acres at Carrowreagh in the present parish of Mullagh and Killoran. Both died almost within a year of each other and Monsignor Madden found himself left with a considerable estate. He gave the home farm of Carrowreagh to the Madden descendants of a first cousin and other property in Cartron to the diocese of Clonfert, with money enough to establish a residential seminary. On 8th May 1893, a scheme was set up under the *Educational Endowments Act* of 1885 and thus the Cartron Estate and the profit thereof became *the Madden Endowment,* to be administered by governors, subject to the conditions set down by the Act.

Cartron House was used as temporary boarding school from 1st October 1892 - 30th June 1893, when eleven students were in attendance. In July 1893 the Governors took a lease of the old Dominican house in Esker, which had been accidentally burned down in 1889. The restoration was effected by a loan of £1,000 from Monsignor Madden and a diocesan collection. Esker was to remain as a diocesan college until its sale to the Redemptorist Order in 1901. The college moved to the residential building in Ballinasloe known as The Pines. A former student of Esker, later to became President of the Pines and bishop of the diocese was John Dignan.

The Redemptorist order as has been said, occupied Esker on 20th May 1901. For some years the Order had been anxious to have a foundation in the West and had even considered Meelick, but thought the better of it, as it had a church but no residence attached. Dr. Healy was only too happy to sell Esker, as it would provide him with the necessary capital for his college in Ballinasloe. The price paid to the Governors was £5.500. The first Redemptorists Fathers to take possession of the house were Fr. Somers and Fr. Andrew Boylan who was later to become Bishop of Kilmore. The order is still there today and run a highly successful retreat centre. The annual Clonfert Diocesan Clergy's retreat also continues to be held there as it was in Dr. Costello's time.

Dr. Healy's other main achievement aside from education was the building of St. Brendan's Cathedral, but St. Brendan's is a unique story and so it deserves a separate section of this book.

Lady Dunlo or "Belle Bilton"

The Twentieth Century

Bishop Thomas Gilmartin

With the death of Archbishop John MacEvilly in November 1902, John Healy was transferred to Tuam. On June 16th 1903, Thomas O'Dea was appointed Bishop of Clonfert. A priest of the diocese of Kilfenora, he had a brief career in Maynooth and had been its vice-president since 1894.

Dr. O'Dea continued the work of his predecessor in decorating St. Brendan's Cathedral, influenced as he was by the Great National Revival, begun by the Gaelic League in the 1890's and he would have nothing but the best that Irish artists could produce. He was also responsible for the purchase of the present episcopal residence at Coorheen. After a comparatively brief career in Clonfert, he became Bishop of Galway in 1909.

His successor in Clonfert was Thomas P. Gilmartin, a priest of the archdiocese of Tuam and also a former staff member in Maynooth. Gilmartin's years as bishop, like those of his successor, Thomas O'Doherty were difficult ones. The outbreak of the Great War and the events of the century that intervened since Dr. Derry's consecration had brought church building and parochial improvement to a standstill. Bishop Gilmartin did, however, in the face of the awful world conflict happening only a short distance away, appeal to his priests to do the heroic thing and for men to offer themselves as Chaplains to the Forces. Four priests of the diocese did so and deserve mention here. The first to volunteer in December 1914 was Fr. Daniel McHugh, C.C. Ballinasloe and a native of Headford. The only photograph of him in the diocesan archives gives the impression of a bespectacled, somewhat diffident

Toc or Fr. O'Connor
as seen by an artist of World War I.

Fr Griffin's Memorial Tombstone, St Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea

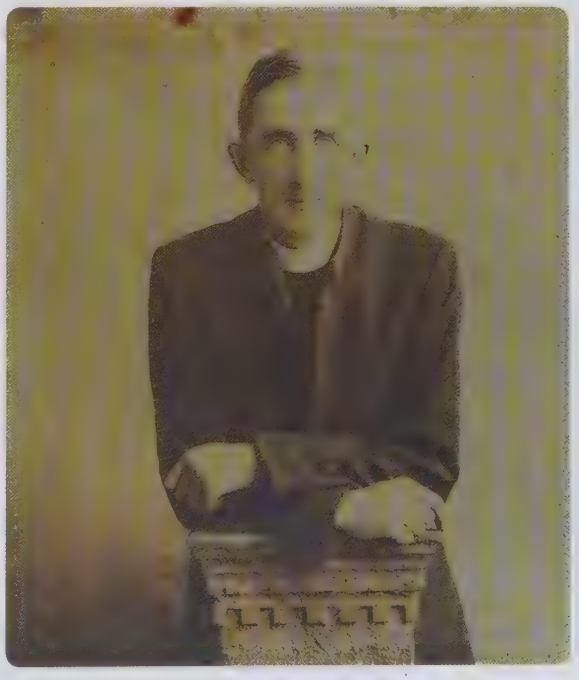
looking man. Appearances in this case are deceptive, as he was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his bravery in situations of extreme personal danger, twice being mentioned in despatches. He served in France, Mesopotania and Turkey with the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders and was raised to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. He continued to serve as a regular army chaplain after the war and returned to duty in World War Two, but a fall from a train platform during an air-raid blackout caused him injuries that forced his retirement. He died peacefully in his sleep in October 1961 and is buried in the English town of Milford-on-Sea. The De La Salle brothers to whom he ministered in his latter years do not forget his memory.

Rev, Thomas O'Connor, born in 1881, was commissioned 27th June 1915. Known by his initials as *TOC*, he had served in a number of curacies before gong on for active service. He was appointed Chaplain to the Renmore-based Connaught Rangers Regiment accompanying them to Gallipoli. The carnage of this particular campaign was to inspire the moving ballad *And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda*. In 1919 Lieutenant Jourdain wrote in his book *The Connaught Rangers* that the *Rev. T.J. O'Connor, R.C Chaplin to the Brigade, accompanied the battalion, determined never to be separated from the men he knew and loved so well... His services to the battalion had been beyond all praise.* Upon his return to Ireland and following the death of Fr. Roderick Meagher, he succeeded to the parish of Mullagh and Killoran as Parish Priest, where he built two schools. He died in the Portiuncula Hospital, Ballinasloe in 1951 shortly after suffering a stroke.

Rev. J.J. Nevin, a native of Tynagh had been ordained in 1914 for Clonfert. Despite his academic background (he had a Doctorate in Canon Law) he was commissioned on March 27th 1916, and served in France. He lost a leg on May 2nd 1917, when the tent in which he was hearing confessions took a hit from a shell. After the war he transferred to the Archdiocese of Sydney, where he taught in the diocesan seminary.

Rev John Kenny O'Neill was born in Ballymacward parish in 1881. After his training in Carlow, he was ordained in 1904. He was commissioned on November 19th 1917, and served in Egypt, suffering the trauma of being on board two separate troop carriers, each of which was torpedoed and sunk. He relinquished his commission after a year and a half and became Parish Priest of Cappatagle, in 1928, where parishioners still remember him vividly. He died in 1964, in a nursing home in Co. Tipperary

Fr John Kenny O'Neill



Old interior, St Michael's, Ballinasloe

The achievements of these four brave men are now only vague recollections. No one knows what awful things they were forced to see, no one knows how difficult they must have found the adjustment to the peace of pastoral life in Clonfert and no one but God Himself, knows what comfort their presence brought to the young men torn apart by one of the worst conflicts in world history.

The horror of violence, however, was not confined to Europe, and in November of 1920, a young priest of Clonfert diocese was murdered. Fr. Michael Griffin who had been ordained for Clonfert in 1916 was a native of Gurteen and had been serving on loan in Galway diocese. The events of that fateful night have never been fully established, but sometime after 11pm on Sunday 14th November, Fr. Griffin was called out of his presbytery. Many believed later that it was on a bogus sick call, but this was not so, as he did not bring his holy oils or the Blessed Eucharist. Almost a week later his body was found in a shallow grave in Cloughscoiltia bog. He had been shot through the head. Bishop O'Dea of Galway, released a statement expressing his horror. *The worst has happened. Fr. Griffin's body has been found shot through the brain. It is the worst in the eyes of the world, the end of all.*

Fr. Griffins' death caused a national outpouring of sorrow and horror at such a gratuitous act. His final obsequies took place in St. Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea, on the morning of Wednesday the 24th November 1920, attended by huge throngs of people. When Mass concluded, six priests came forward and shouldered the coffin to its grave to the left of the entrance to the Cathedral.

One of these friends was Fr. John Dignan, a former teacher of Fr. Griffin. At the end of his panegyric for Fr. Griffin, Bishop O'Doherty of Clonfert said:

I am convinced that his gentle soul is even now pleading for his murderers as Christ did for his – "Father forgive them as they know not what they do" let this be our prayer too.
The Gospel of Christ is not a Gospel of revenge.
We sing no hymn of hate.
You and I will sincerely pray that God may have mercy on the man who fired the fatal shot...

Fr. Griffin was one of three priests to be murdered in one year. Canon Magner, the elderly Parish Priest of Dunmanway in Co. Cork, was shot for refusing to toll his church bell on Armistice Day and Fr James O'Callaghan C.C. Clogheen, Co. Cork was ambushed and murdered in his lodgings in May of 1921

Fr Daniel McHugh, O.B.E.

Bishop John Dignan

In such troubled and dangerous times, Dr. John Dignan took over the see of Clonfert. Born in 1880, his father Thomas, who was a *Gentleman farmer* and his mother Sarah, were on very friendly terms with Dr. John Healy. When John Dignan went on for the church in 1896, he became Healy's protégé, as it were. Ordained in 1903, he took up his first appointment on the staff of St. Joseph's College, The Pines, and became its President in 1904 when Fr. Michael Saunders moved to teach in St. Paul's University, Minnesota. Saunders was the son of Thomas Saunders of the famous siege of 1886. In 1919 Dignan became Administrator of the Parish of Duniry and Abbey, when the Parish Priest Fr. Patrick Egan suffered a debilitating stroke and, on his death in 1921, succeeded him.

Despite his great respect for Dr. Healy whose views were deeply conservative, Dr. Dignan became more nationalistic in his own outlook as time went by. This was primarily due to his friendship and frequent discussions with Fr. Patrick Connolly, a priest of the diocese and Dr. Ada English, a psychiatrist in Ballinasloe.

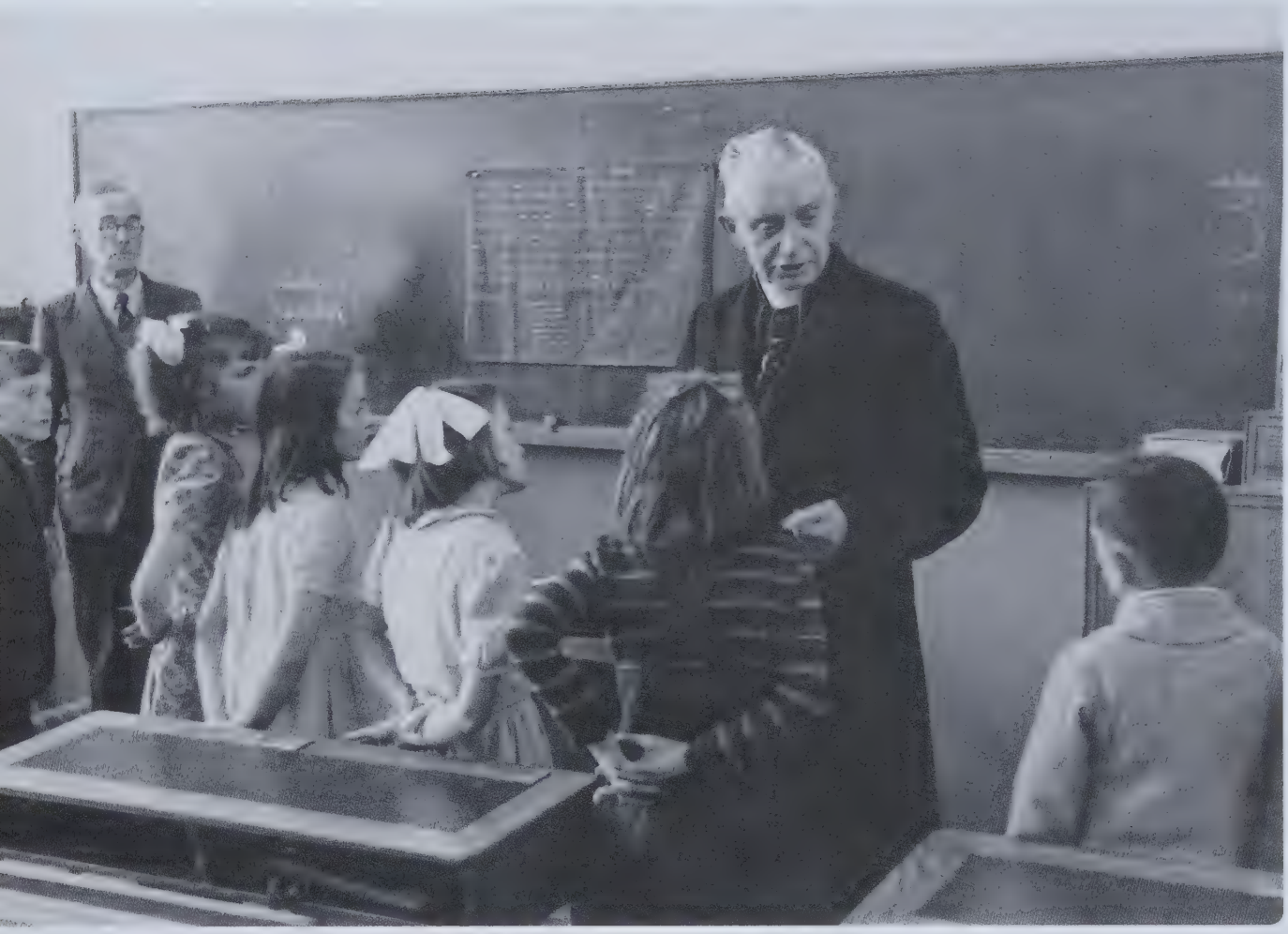
Fr Peter Greaney

Bishop John Dignan

So outspoken did his views become, in fact, that he became a target for the Black and Tans, who in April 1921 raided his home. Finding him out, they looted it and threw a hand grenade into his sitting room. Dignan had received a tip-off before this of their impending arrival and escaped in mufti to the parochial house in the parish of Leitrim, where his close friend Fr. James Spellman was Administrator. He had good reason to fear, as there had already been an unsuccessful plot to abduct Bishop Fogarty of Killaloe and drown him in the

Bishop Dignan on a visit to Clontuskert Parish in 1943

Portiuncula Hospital – Opening day 9th April 1945
front row: Owen Larkin (Contractor), Mother Margaret, Bishop Dignan, Mother Francis
back row: Mr. Kenny (Consultant, Engineer), Fr Oliver OFM, Mgr Joyce, Mr. H. Byne (Architect)



Bishop Dignan on school visitation – 1943

Shannon. On the same day as Dignan's home was raided by the Black and Tans, Fr. Thomas Dunne P.P. Kilnadeema had a bomb fired at his residence from a passing police lorry.

He was appointed to Clonfert on 24th March 1924, Bishop O'Doherty having moved to Galway in July of the previous year. Some shock was caused at his episcopal consecration when Dr. Dignan acknowledged congratulations from Sinn Féin saying: *Much as I regret that the majority did not vote in 1923, as they did in 1918, this does not prevent you from using moral and peaceful means to persuade the people to go back from the position they occupied before the Treaty was signed.* Though many were delighted at his public support, his statement prompted Archbishop Gilmartin to say to a colleague, *After that, I am finished consecrating bishops.*

Dr. Dignan came across as a fearless kind of Irish bishop. At his first episcopal conference in Maynooth, upon being introduced to the Primate of All Ireland, Dr. Michael Logue, the elderly Cardinal, is reputed to have put both his arms in the air and said jokingly, *Hands up!*

Dr. Dignan's greatest contribution to life in Clonfert over his twenty-nine years as bishop was in the field of education. During his time, many primary schools were built anew and older ones refurbished. He encouraged young people to attend the newly established Vocational Schools and promoted the use of the Irish language. In fact, the only all - Irish secondary school magazine of the time was *Gearrbhaile* edited by one of his young priests Fr. Eric Fair, better known as An tAthair Eric Mac Fhinn. Dr. Dignan had a particularly fond regard for the diocesan college, which in 1923 had moved from the Pines to Garbally Park, the former mansion seat of the Earls of Clancarty. One wonders what Bishop Coen would have made of such a turnaround in fortunes! The first President of the newly located college was Fr. Thomas Dempsey, a native of Kiltullagh parish, but when he joined the staff of University College, Galway in 1924, Dr. Dignan appointed in his place Fr. James Cogavin.

1942 Jubilee Celebrations (from left to right) Frs James Shiel, Hugh Flynn, John Glynn, Peter Greaney

1942 Jubilee Celebrations (from left to right) Rev.s Bernard M. Bowes, Timothy Joyce, James Spellman, John Fallon

Cogavin was a man with great personal charisma and gravitas, and in its early years he worked tirelessly to promote the college.

Since then its past students have gone on to distinction in every walk of life, be it religion, politics, business, and civic positions. Bishops Henry Byrne S.S.C, John Howe S.S.C, Patrick Winters S.C.A, Patrick Kelly S.M.A, Thomas Stewart S.S.C, and John Kirby are all past pupils. It has given countless vocations to the diocese of Clonfert, and also to the missionary and contemplative orders. It is justly considered one of the finest secondary schools in the West of Ireland and has provided many a fond memory for past students of triumphs on the sports field, on the stage in the annual college opera, and in the examination hall. It is also one of the finest extant examples of the old estate houses, due primarily to the considerable energies of its incumbent President, Fr. Colm Allman. There was a palpable sense of sadness throughout the diocese when it was announced in October 2005, that due to declining numbers and lack of personnel, the boarding school would close in June 2008. St. Joseph's College, however, continues to fulfil its role as an educator in a manner, which would make Dr. Dignan justly proud.

As a boy, Dr. Dignan had studied within the halls of Esker and listened to Dr. Healy speak on his visits to the college of the rich history of the diocese. This, no doubt, helped instill in him a great love for Clonfert, which was evident in all his work. He encouraged people in the twenty-four parishes, to take pride in their local cemeteries and keep them well. He wrote various articles on the subject. In 1936, he accepted an invitation from the then minister for Local Government and Public Health, Mr. Sean McEntee, to become the Chairman of the Committee of Management of the National Health Insurance Society. This gave him a keen insight into social conditions at the time and in 1944, he outlined a scheme of national health insurance, which became known as *The Dignan Plan*. The scheme was rejected by the government of the day, but was highly commended by many sectors of society.

In 1942 Bishop Dignan invited the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood to Ballinasloe, where they set up a nursing home in Mount Pleasant. The sisters who were sent to Ireland to find a suitable location were Mother Mary Margaret Keenan and Sr. Mary Bernard Rudden. Later in 1943 he donated to them a gift of some land in Brackernagh and in the same year laid the foundation stone for what has become Portiuncula Hospital. In the year 2000, the hospital was transferred to the Western Health board and in 2004 the sisters took up residence in a new convent, not far from the Portiuncula. Some of the sisters are still actively involved in the pastoral care team there. Their presence in Portiuncula Hospital since its foundation has brought both physical and spiritual comfort to countless patients who have passed through its wards and the diocese of Clonfert owes them a deep debt of gratitude.

Following a heart attack after a confirmation ceremony in Eyrecourt in the late 1940's, Dr. Dignan's health began to decline, though he still kept to a robust schedule. The late P.K. Egan recalled him shortly before his death speaking to parishioners in the cemetery in Kiltormer on a bitterly cold day, supporting his increasingly frail body by draping his arms around two large headstones. He died at his residence in Coorheen on Sunday, April 12th 1953.

There was a genuine wave of sorrow throughout Clonfert, at the passing of this tenacious champion of independence and of the small man and he is justly considered by many to be one of the greatest successors of St. Brendan. Before he died he insisted that no large monument mark his grave and so he is buried among his parishioners in Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Loughrea. The spot is marked by a small but sturdy iron cross, bearing only his name, title of office and date of death. 1953 was anything but a good year for the diocese and barely four months after Dr. Dignan's passing, Fr. Peter Greaney P.P. of New Inn, died in a Dublin nursing home of an inoperable brain tumour. He was only fifty-six. A former long-term staff member and president of Garbally, he was affectionately known as *Peadar* and in a short article for *Gearrbhaile* written some years before, perhaps best typified the feelings of the past pupils of the diocesan college. He said of his time in the Pines: *We used to take life easily enough and the life worked out well for us. We gave good example to each other, and God was grateful to us.* Fr. Greaney had been a good friend to the college and to the diocese and at his funeral priests and past pupils wept openly.

Some mention must be made before moving on, of Monsignor Timothy Joyce, a contemporary of Bishop Dignan's. Described by Dr. P.K.Egan as a *man of boundless energy and great personal charm* he was one of the best known and well liked priests of the diocese. As Vicar-General he was instrumental in acquiring Garbally Park as the diocesan college's new location and in his time as Parish Priest of Portumna he spared no effort in encouraging the people to improve the town. Though a favourite for the bishopric when Dr. O'Doherty moved to Galway, he nonetheless threw his full support behind Dr. Dignan on his appointment.

Prize-Giving-Day, Garbally College, 1933. Master Tomas MacAodha presented with his prize by Bishop Dignan. Fr John Madden and Monsignor Joyce look on

Bishop William Philbin

Clonfert Bishops and Garbally Past Pupils. Bishop O'Mahony, Bishop Winters, Bishop Kelly, Bishop Philbin, Bishop Ryan, Bishop Byrne, Bishop Howe - Taken during the Second Council

On 22nd December 1953, Dr. William Philbin was appointed Bishop of Clonfert. A native of Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo, he had a distinguished career as Professor of Dogmatic Theology in Maynooth from 1937-1953. He was also a regular contributor to the *Irish Theological Quarterly* and was noted for his scholarly writings. At the time of his consecration, he was the youngest of the Irish Bishops. Dr. Philbin came to be regarded by many as an original thinker, especially in encouraging the development of new approaches to social questions. In his book, *Church and State in Modern Ireland* (1980) Dr. J.H. Whyte said of him ... *Dr. Philbin has come to be regarded as a conservative, but in the 1950's his speeches and articles on social questions attracted interest because of the originality of them.*

He also published a series of pamphlets, the best known of which was *Patriotism* (1958). In it, he argued that, *In spite of many excellences, love of one's fatherland does not impart automatically the stamp of rightness to all that is undertaken in its name.*

He also warned *where emotions take the lead, reason, the proper guide of conduct, is often suspended and we are apt to be led into excess and errors.* His words were to be prophetic and ironic for he was later to see firsthand the full horror of the Northern Ireland conflict, as Bishop of Down and Connor.

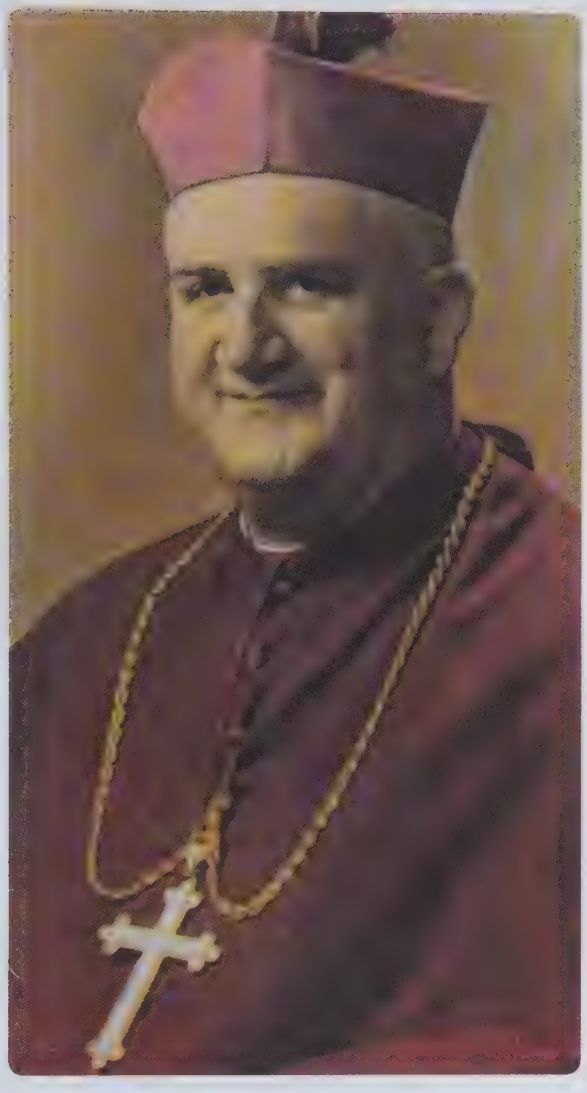
During his episcopate, Clonfert shared in the great wave of the Marian Devotion that was sweeping the world. On Sunday 16th May 1954, more than thirty thousand people gathered in Loughrea to pay tribute to Our Lady at a Rosary Crusade Rally. The town had not seen such crowds since Daniel O'Connell had held his repeal demonstration there in 1843. Both Dr. Philbin, and the renowned rosary priest, Fr. Patrick Peyton, addressed the rally, on that occasion.

Bishop Michael Browne, Bishop William Philbin, Bishop James Fergus at Dr. Philbins Consecration, 1954

During his time in Clonfert, Dr. Philbin encouraged the refurbishment, modernisation and building of churches and parochial houses. In 1954 the pre-famine church of St. Oran in the parish of Mullagh and Killoran was demolished, rebuilt and rededicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, in honour of the Marian year. In Kilconiron, a new church was completed in 1961 and dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and in Portumna a magnificent new church was dedicated to St. Brigid on May 7th 1961. And it was not lost on those present in Portumna that day, that the cut stone used on its construction had been taken from the ruins of Clanricard's new castle, which had been burned down in 1922.

Portumna, too, was to be the location of a new diocesan college founded by Dr.Philbin in 1956. Situated on Dominic Street, it was dedicated to St. Molaisse, who was reputed to have built the first Christian Church at Lickmolassey hill in the 6th Century. The college's first (and only) President and teacher was Fr. Brendan Jordan, a native of Ballyhaunis who had been ordained the previous year. In 1972 it was amalgamated with Maria Regina College, and in 1990 it joined St. Brigid's Vocational School, to form the present Portumna Community School. Other priests of the diocese who served on the staff include Rev. Sean Lyons, now Parish Priest of Duniry/Abbey, Rev Vivian Twohig, now Parish Priest of Mullagh and Killoran, Rev. P.J.Bracken now Parish Priest of Fahy/Quansboro, Rev.Vincent Marren, R.I.P and Rev Patrick Lohan. With the death of Daniel Mageean, Bishop of Down and Connor, in 1962, Dr. Philbin was provided to that see, and on May 9th 1963, Monsignor Thomas Ryan was appointed Bishop of Clonfert.

Bishop Thomas Ryan



Bishop Thomas Ryan

Born of farming stock in Kilcommon, Co. Tipperary in 1915, Dr, Ryan had trained at St. Patrick's College, Thurles and the Irish College in Rome. He held Doctorates in Theology and Canon Law and in 1943 was appointed Secretary of the Apostolic Delegation in Istanbul, where he became Secretary to Cardinal Roncalli, now known as Blessed Pope John XXIII. By the age of twenty-eight he was the youngest Monsignor in the world. At a much later date when President Eisenhower congratulated Pope John XXIII on the fluency of his English, the Holy Father replied: *I have a very good teacher, Monsignor Ryan.*

The appointment of such a distinguished churchman was a great honour for Clonfert, and a nice touch was the fact that one of his closest friends from his college days, Fr. Patrick Cuffe, was a curate in the diocese. He was installed in St. Brendan's Cathedral on the 14th July, 1963. He gave a sense of the kind of man he was when he told the people on that occasion: *I come to you as your new bishop with little previous experience of the pastoral ministry. But I come with a firm resolution to dedicate myself completely to my task and to devote my entire energies to the care of the souls entrusted to my care in the diocese of the great St. Brendan.*

The sixties were a time of tremendous change, and Catholics world wide felt the cool of the fresh air that Blessed Pope John XXIII let into the Church. In trying to prepare the faithful of Clonfert for these changes Dr. Ryan said in his Lenten Pastoral of 1965: *For many of you, my dear brethren, it may not be easy to adapt yourselves to this new method of assisting at Mass. Indeed the Irish people are renowned the world over, for their faithful attention at Mass and for the interior devotion with which they assist. That interior devotion will not only be preserved, but will be increased and intensified by your external and active participation in the offering of the Holy Sacrifice.* Dr. Ryan being a native of Co. Tipperary also helped vocations to the priesthood for the diocese. Through his friendship and informal conversations with the late Canon Augustine O'Donnell, some students in St. Patrick's College, Thurles, were encouraged to consider Clonfert diocese as a final mission, and thus a link was forged, that has remained to the present day. St. Patrick's College, Thurles, ordained fourteen priests for the diocese of Clonfert between 1974 and 1994.

A prolific writer of pastoral letters, Dr. Ryan was not afraid to make his views known, when he felt the occasion called for it. In 1972 while leading the annual diocesan pilgrimage to Knock, he warned against deleting the names of the Divine Persons from the Constitution and against the efforts of some to abolish the practise

Fr John Fahy, Bishop Thomas Ryan, Fr John Glynn, An t-Athair McFhinn

of ringing the Angelus on the national airwaves. He was also a man with a concern for the question of emigration, and in 1974, he appointed Fr. Sean Slattery, the diocesan representative on the Episcopal Commission for Emigrants. He could not have chosen a more suited man for the post and Fr.Slattery continued in the position until 1994. Being a highly gifted fundraiser, much needed monies were raised for Clonfert natives abroad with profits being used for diocesan projects, such as the ecclesiastical museum in Loughrea and the Town Hall in Ballinasloe. Today Fr. Slattery serves as P.P. Ballymacward.

Towards the end of the nineteen- seventies, Dr. Ryan began to suffer from indifferent health and in September 1979, Dr. Joseph Cassidy was appointed as his coadjutor. Bishop Ryan finally retired in May 1982, but died in August 1983. A man of strong, childlike faith, it was his successor who paid the most moving tribute to him... *He was totally resigned to the will of God... He had been a powerful man physically in his prime. He was an even more powerful man spiritually in his decline. His physical decline was a spiritual ascent...Thomas Ryan, God rest him died like a Saint.*

Bishop Joseph Cassidy

A native of Charlestown,Co. Mayo, Dr. Cassidy, like one of his predecessors Dr. Philbin, had been ordained for the diocese of Achonry. In 1959 he came on loan to Clonfert to teach in the diocesan college, where he became a popular member of the staff. After five years he was officially incardinated and in 1977, became President of the College. During his time on the staff, he established *The Fountain* an annual magazine for students to express their views and directed many of the college operas. He was regarded as an excellent teacher of English. His great love of the language poured over into his Sunday homilies, which used ordinary but refreshingly new analogies for the students of the time. While extremely sad to see him go, the college community realised that this uniquely talented man would now be bringing those talents to bear in full for the benefit of the entire diocese.

Bishop Joseph Cassidy and Canon Gallagher

A man of keen pastoral awareness, Dr. Cassidy threw his full energies behind his new role as leader of Clonferts' faithful. During his episcopate, he tirelessly promoted vocations to the priesthood, spoke out on emigration, unemployment and social injustice and was a constant source of encouragement to his priests. His giftedness in communication was particularly evident in his time as spokesman for the hierarchy. He also initiated the Clonfert Third World Farm. This novel project saw cattle donated by the parishes of the diocese and grazed on the Bishop's land going towards Clonfert-born religious working in Third World Countries.

St Therese welcomed to Loughrea

Fr Sean Slattery presents cheque for £55,000 to Bishop Cassidy

In 1987, the oratory at Emmanuel House of Providence was opened by Michael and Annette Cullen, near the ancient Cathedral of Clonfert. Today under the guidance of Eddie and Lucy Stones, Emmanuel House attracts large numbers of people who come to pray for healing and attend the sacraments. 1987 also saw the opening of a Family Ministry Programme in Ballinasloe at the initiative of Fr. Ciaran Kitching, who had extensive training in Pastoral Theology.

There was great sorrow towards the end of that year, with the news of Dr. Cassidy's appointment as Archbishop of Tuam. Before he left he said: *I have to say that I will really miss Clonfert. I've been in the diocese for twenty-eight years, and I've put down very deep roots... I'll bring you with me in my heart and my prayers.*

Bishop John Kirby

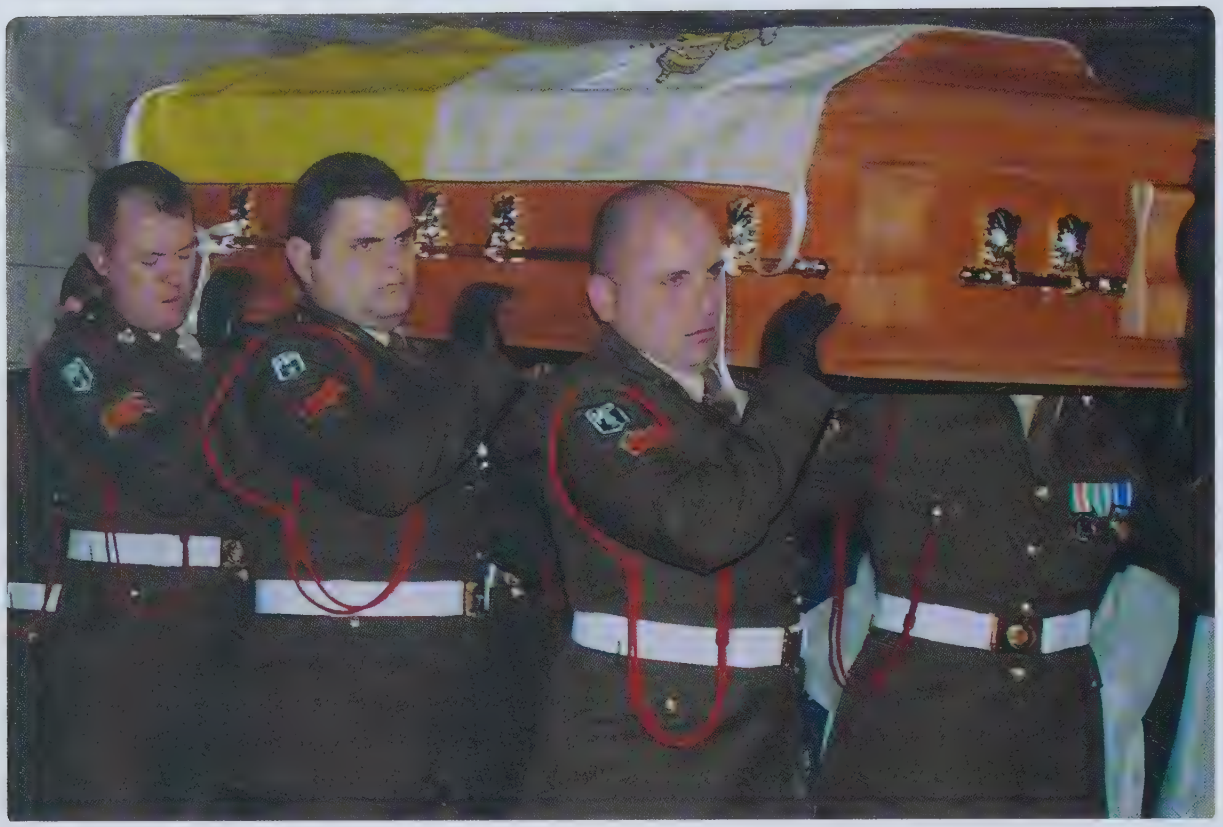
His Excellency, Most Rev. Dr. Lazzarotto and Bishop Kirby

On 9th April, 1988, Dr. John Kirby was consecrated Bishop of Clonfert. A native of Athlone, Dr. Kirby was ordained in 1963 and spent most of his time on the staff of the diocesan college, of which he had served as President since 1979. In the seventies, however, he combined his teaching duties with those of a curate, serving in Ballymacward and Gurteen (1974-1977) and Kilrickle (1977-1979).

At the time of his appointment, he was the youngest Bishop in Ireland. The day following his consecration, Dr. Kirby made known that his priorities as Bishop of Clonfert would be like those of his predecessor, firmly grounded in the pastoral concerns of his flock. At mass in St. Michael's Church in Ballinasloe, the Chairman of the Parish Pastoral Council, Mr. Patsy Geraghty told him ... *you will always have our support and our help. All you have to do is ask. Our doors will always be open to you and you will always be assured of a welcome in our homes.*

As a teacher of twenty-five years experience, Dr. Kirby gained invaluable insights into family life and as a consequence brought to his role as leader

Archbishop Courtney and Bishop Kirby in Burundi, 24th November 2003



Sad homecoming - Dr. Courtney's funeral

of the dioceses thirty five thousand catholics strong feelings on questions of emigration, social justice and unemployment. Shortly after his appointment as Chairman of Trocaire, the Third World agency in 1993, he said in an interview given to the *Irish Catholic: I see a need for the Church to stand back from society and re-examine its own role in relation to society, to become more challenging on a social and pastoral level.*

Challenges, of course, did present themselves and few so horrible as in May 1994, when Fr. Joe Walsh, a young priest of the diocese, met with a violent death. On the occasion of his requiem mass in Eyrecourt church, Bishop Kirby paid tribute to the much loved priest and also to the priesthood of Christ: *Priests, like Fr. Joe, and like the early disciples of Christ "remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (ACTS 2:42). They will never be famous or well known, but they are the people who quietly build up the community, and who help to give it it's sense of identity.*

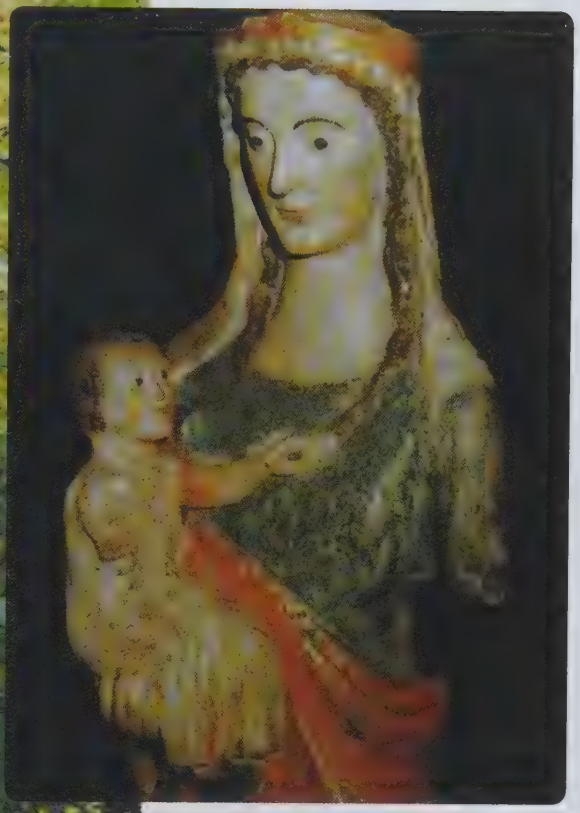
Sadly, the diocese of Clonfert was to feel the pain of the violent loss of one of its priests, for the second time in a decade, with the assassination of Archbishop Michael Courtney in December 2003. Dr. Courtney, Papal Nuncio to Burundi, died after his car was ambushed while returning from a funeral. Having served in curacies in Tynagh and Woodford, he returned to Rome in 1976 to pursue post-graduate studies. Thereafter, he entered the Pontifical Diplomatic Academy and later served

St Brendan's Cathedral Centenary Celebrations (from l. to r.) Very Rev. Cathal Geraghty, Adm. Bishop Fleming of Killala, ArchbishopCassidy, His Excellency Dr. Giuseppe Lazzarotto (Apostolic Nuncio), Bishop Kirby, Archbishop Neary of Tuam, Bishop Flynn of Achonry, Bishop McLoughlin of Galway, Bishop Jones of Elphin

Celebration of the Eucharist, Portumna Forest Park, September 2005

in Diplomatic Missions to Zimbabwe, Senegal, India, Yugoslavia, Cuba and Egypt. On Sunday, November 12th in his home church of St. Mary of the Rosary, Nenagh, he was ordained Archbishop of Eanach Dúin, and Apostolic Nuncio to Burundi.

The people of God, however, are nothing if not people of hope and recent years have seen the diocese of Clonfert celebrating its faith and rich heritage. The visit of St. Therese's relics to Loughrea in June 2001, recalled the days of the Rosary Rally, with record crowds thronging St. Brendan's Cathedral in veneration and on October 17th 2003, St. Brendan's celebrated it's centenary with a special mass attended by his Excellency, Dr. Lazzarotto and the Western Bishops.



Our Lady of Clonfert

Nature's Cathedral,
Lawrencetown

Conclusion

Bishop Dignan on school visitation – 1943

Over sixty years ago, Bishop Dignan wrote a short piece of historical fancy in which he imagined taking St. Brendan on a tour of Modern Clonfert, as it was then. The conclusion of this book is left to the last paragraph Dr.Dignan penned on that occasion.

It was almost dark as we approached Clonfert, and I noticed he had asked very few questions for the last half hour. It was quite evident that he was thinking over what he had seen.... for I heard him murmur quietly to himself "Cluain Fearta" - land of the miracle. This is the true meaning of Cluain Fearta and a miracle indeed it is that the little seed I planted fourteen hundred years ago would grow and flourish and become the tree that I see blooming today in Clonfert...How were my people and my Diocese able to overcome the dangers, the wars, the persecutions which they suffered for centuries? No human power could enable them to survive and to conquer. Only by Divine intervention, only by the protecting hand of God could it have been done. Cluain Fearta–Land of the Miracle.

The Pattern

Until late in the nineteenth century, one of the most popular forms of religious practice in parishes throughout the diocese was *The Pattern*. A corruption of the name *Patron*, these occasions usually had as their focal point a holy well associated with the local Christian founder. Only two significant patterns now remain in Clonfert diocese – St. Ronan's in the parish of Taughmaconnell and St.Kerrill's in the parish of Ballymacward and Gurteen.

St. Ronan's pattern day is held on 21st June. While there is no written record of the foundation of the parish, this is still a well-attended event in Taughmaconnell, incorporating the celebration of the Eucharist. In older times people performed a station at the well. The station consisted of walking around the well fifteen times in bare feet while praying, then kissing the wounds of Our Saviour on the cross and taking a drink from the well.

St. Kerrill, was a native of Sodhan, an early celtic kingdom and founded the first church at Clonkeenkerrill, taken from *Cluain Caoin Cairill - the delightful meadow of Kerrill*. Each year on June 13th his pattern is celebrated. According to Kerrill's biographer, Joseph Mannion, this pattern dates back to the beginning of the ninth century. Annually, following a commemorative mass in Gurteen Church, pilgrims undertake a three mile walk to St. Kerrill's Well, carrying light wooden crosses. Five stations are performed in the field where the well is located, the fifth and final at the well itself. Finally, water from the well, believed to ward off lightning, is brought home by pilgrims.

St Patrick's Rock, Kiltormer

Portumna Priory

St Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea

St Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea

St Patrick by A.E. Child, St Brendan's Cathedral

Though comparatively small as a Cathedral church, what St. Brendan's loses in size, it more than compensates for in the scope of the beauty of its artistry. The fact that the artistry is entirely indigenous makes it all the more outstanding. Bishop Duggan's attempts to have a cathedral built for the people of his diocese were largely unsuccessful, due to the obduracy of the Marquis of Clanricard.

Testifying before the Richmond Commission of Agriculture in June, 1880, Dr. Duggan complained: *I have the sum of £2,000 lying idle in the bank for the last six years to build a church in a town containing a population of 3,000 people, but he lives away in London, and he won't permit me to build a church for my people on his estate.* Eventually, however, Dr. Duggan did manage to purchase a site worthy of his great purpose, but was to die a year before the foundation stone was laid. Nor did his successor, Dr. Healy, entertain high esteem for the old marquis. Writing to Rome in 1895, the bishop said of him: *He is apparently the last representative of this ancient and powerful race in the male line, and has done more to bring the ancient name of Clanricard into dishonour and shame than all those who have gone before him put together.*

Notwithstanding this, the foundation stone for the cathedral was blessed by Dr. Healy on 10th October 1897. As a man who had a deep appreciation of Irish history and culture, Dr. Healy was not unmindful of the Irish Literary Renaissance and the renewed interest in native artistry. This combined with the involvement in the project of Edward Martyn helped to make St. Brendan's Cathedral the treasure-trove of the Celtic Revival that is today. Martyn, who had links with Loughrea, gave of his personal fortune and time to ensure that the cathedral reflected the Irish Revival.

Carving on Nave Capital by Michael Shortall
St Brendan baptised by St Erc, St Brendan's Cathedral

The Man of Sorrows by John Hughes, above High Altar, St Brendan's Cathedral

Another factor of note was the supervision in the early years of Jeremiah O'Donovan, an energetic young curate in the parish. He would later become Administrator.

The cathedral building was completed but not entirely finished when Dr. O'Dea became bishop –in point of fact his consecration on 30th August, 1903, was the first public function to be held there.

Dr. O'Dea threw himself into the project with great gusto. He sought out and employed only the best Irish artists, and insisted that as far as possible only Irish material be used. Dr. Dignan wrote twenty years after Bishop O'Dea's death that *As long as the cathedral lasts, Dr. O'Dea's name will be remembered in Clonfert.* Indeed, it was Dr. O'Dea who charged William A. Scott with the design of the furnishings.

During the episcopate of Dr. Thomas O'Doherty (1919-1923), the cathedral grounds were laid out in a beautifully planned style and in the time of his successor Dr. John Dignan, a further twelve stained-glass windows were installed. It was also during his episcopate that Michael Shortall carved on the capitals of the nave the various scenes from St. Brendan's life and on the capitals of the transepts varied incidents from the history of the diocese.

Indeed, each successor of St. Brendan was to put his own individual stamp on the Cathedral up to the present day. Dr. Cassidy had new sanctuary furniture commissioned from artist Ray Carroll in the late 1980's, and for the centenary year, Dr. Kirby commissioned Tom Glendon to complete the carving of the unfinished capitals over the sanctuary area. Mr. Glendon dedicated the carvings to Ss. Luke and John, incorporating into them the great doorway of Clonfert and the image of Our Lady of Clonfert.

Just a short step outside the cathedral is the *Clonfert Diocesan Museum.* Originally established by Bishop Philbin and Rev. Dr. Kevin Egan in 1957, it has since moved from its early home in the Castle by the gateway.

It is considered the finest ecclesiastical museum in Ireland and houses some of the most beautiful examples of church art and craftsmanship. The oldest chalice in its collection is the *Mateus Macraith chalice* dating from c.1500

Among its fabrics are kept the *Napoleon III vestments*, a set of requiem mass vestments presented by the emperor to Fr. William Manning, P.P., Aughrim in 1858, to celebrate requiem mass for General Charles Chalmont and the fallen French soldiers of Aughrim.

Also in the collection of fabrics are the

Banners of the Dún Emer Guild. Established by one Evelyn Gleeson, the Dún Emer Guild produced twenty-four banners for the Cathedral and a set of mass vestments in rich colours.

The most venerable object in the collection, however, is the *Kilcorban Virgin and Child.* Dating from the twelfth or early thirteenth century, it is three feet high and constructed of oak. The child's right hand, no longer intact, originally pointed upwards to Our Lady, symbolising Her Divine Motherhood and His Divine and Human Nature. Kept for many years in the parish church of Tynagh, it became associated locally with a goodly number of miraculous favours.

In the catholic church in the parish of Eyrecourt, Meelick and Clonfert, is kept the statue of Our Lady of Clonfert.

Throughout the month of May a Novena is held in her honour, which attracts huge crowds from all over the country. Perhaps a century or so older than the Kilcorban Madonna, the Clonfert Mother and Child emphasises Her Motherhood of the human race.

Writing for the centenary celebrations of 2003, Fr. Cathal Geraghty, Administrator,

The Ascension by Michael Healy, St Brendan's Cathedral

The Resurrection of Jesus by Michael Shortall, St Brendan's Cathedral

Loughrea, and Curator of the Ecclesiastical Museum said: *We have in Loughrea a Cathedral of rare beauty and we would like to share that beauty with others, especially those who have yet to behold this "jewel in the crown" of Church Art from the Celtic Revival period... The beauty of the surroundings gives visible witness to the glory of Our Creator in the artwork produced by those who have been empowered by Him.*

«St Brendan's Voyage», as seen by Maria Downey, St Brendan's, N.S., Mullagh.

Publisher:
Editions du Signe
B.P. 94 – 67038 Strasbourg, Cedex 2, France

Layout:
Om Design

Photography and Text:
Fr. Declan Kelly, C.C.

Publishing Director:
Christian Riehl

Director of Publication:
Joelle Bernhard

Photoengraving:
Atelier du Signe - 106928

© Editions du Signe, 2006

ISBN: 978-2-7468-1738-8

Printed in EEC